

IMAGES FOR PREACHING IN LATVIAN GODSONGS

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by
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ABSTRACT

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This project searches for new ways to preach God's presence in everyday experience. The secular world has no place for God and church tradition has tended to emphasize God's transcendence. As a result, God's presence needs to be revisioned in a way that is meaningful to contemporary believers. It is my thesis that for my Latvian Lutheran congregation, the imagery of God that is found in our Godsongs, together with the dynamic relationship of God-and-the-world that is Process thought, can offer creative possibilities for preaching God's presence in daily life.

The project examines the Godsongs which are part of the folkloric heritage of the Latvian people. This ancient and pre-Christian tradition envisions God's relationship to the world in a way that is quite similar to Process thought. In both paradigms, God is ever-present in all of creation as shared divine wisdom and power. The Godsongs say that God is present and God helps in poetic images that speak to the heart. Process thought addresses the mind; it models God-and-the-world in a way that makes sense to the scientific sensibilities of contemporary people.

The Godsongs and Process thought provide new metaphors for preaching that address the whole person—head and heart. As metaphors, they are partial but also illuminating. Because they are “heard” in a way that older metaphors may not be, they bring the hearer of the sermon into the preaching process to agree or disagree. The hearer completes the sermon in his or her mind.

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I would like to honor the memory of my son, John who died in 1999 and of my father-in-law, also John, who was a Lutheran pastor and is my role model for loving ministry.

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INTRODUCTION

As a pastor, I preach to a congregation that lives in a secular world and brings this world to church on Sunday. This project asks the question—is this a one way process? How can we get God out of church and into the world? What words can I find, as a preacher, to speak of God who is present in everyday life in the secular world? This is not a problem unique to our times; in the story of the Transfiguration; Peter wants to stay on the mountain, but Jesus is already on his way down into the world. However, the stories and metaphors of our tradition have tended to emphasize the transcendence of God to the point that God now seems to have nothing to do with daily life. It is, therefore, my responsibility to look for new words that do not sacrifice either transcendence or immanence.

This project will suggest that two sources for new words that speak to the reality of my congregation are Process thought and the Latvian Godsongs. The Process model makes sense in our world that thinks in terms of science; it speaks to the head. In my Latvian congregation, the folkloric heritage, of which the Godsongs are a part, speak to the heart. This project will seek to find ways to express God's presence in everyday life by weaving together a Process view of God as the initial aim that is necessarily present for anything to exist and the mythic view of God that is present in the Godsongs. The scope of the project encompasses an ancient and a postmodern cosmology but it limits itself to those aspects of these cosmologies that talk about God's presence and the way that God is present. The insights that it will seek to find will come from the poetic

expression of the songs and from the intellectually satisfying Process model. It is my thesis that for a Latvian congregation, the imagery of God that is found in the Godsongs, together with dynamic relationship of God-and-the-world that is Process thought, can offer creative possibilities for preaching God's presence in daily life.

This project is the result of a long and meandering journey. As I became acquainted with Process thought, I found that it spoke to my mind and my world. The Process model gave me a way to think about God's presence, and it was only then, that I discovered how much I had "missed" God. A class in storytelling theology made me think about the songs of my ethnic tradition and the way that they speak (or sing) about God in daily life. I began to wonder if these two paradigms' view of God-and-the-world might have something in common.

In my Latvian Lutheran tradition, Christian religion and the Godsongs are seen as two separate and even contradictory paradigms; God and *Dieviņš* have nothing in common. It is not that the church has ignored the songs; during the first period of Latvian independence before World War II, several theologians and professors of the University of Latvia School of Theology studied the ancient religion from a historical and anthropological standpoint. Among them are the Rector of the School, Prof. Ludvigs Adamovičs,¹ as well as Prof. Ludis Bērziņš and especially Dr. Haralds Biezais who has written a magisterial study of several

¹ Ludvigs Adamovičs, *Senlatviešu mitoloģija* (Ancient Latvian mythology) (Copenhagen: Imanta, 1956). Adamovičs argues that the ancient pagan view of God and that of Christianity must have seemed similar to the early missionaries because they did not change God's name, *Dievs*.

volumes that was published after the war in Sweden.² However, as far as I know, the church has not continued this work and today it is folklorists who are doing academic research on the songs.³ All in all, the Latvian Lutheran church regards the Godsongs as alien to a Christian worldview. On the other hand, there are neo-pagan groups who base their spirituality on the Godsongs and who tend, on the whole, to be critical of the church. However they would probably agree with the church that the Godsongs and Christianity have nothing to say to each other. In this project, I will ask if this is true or if it might be possible that the songs could offer insights for Christians. Process thought speaks of propositions that add interest to preaching; it was my feeling, that the Godsongs' way of seeing God's presence could be one such proposition.

To test my thesis, the first step is to examine the content of the songs and to find out how they see God in relationship to the world. This is what I will do in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, I examine how the songs communicate as poetry and as myth. In this section, I will draw from work by Nathan A. Scott, Jr., Amos Wilder and John Macquarrie. Chapter 3 tests my belief that Process thought and the Godsongs can "speak" to each other, especially about God's presence which is communicated to the world as wisdom and power. In this chapter, I was informed by the Process theology of Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki. If Process thought and the songs can speak to each other, how are they to speak to a congregation? This is the question asked by Chapter 4 and the answer that it will propose is they speak

² Biezais' work is written in German and it is now being translated into Latvian and being published in Latvia. The first volume to be published was Seno latviešu debesu dievu ģimene (The family of the ancient Latvian sky gods) (Riga: Minerva, 1998).

³ Prominent among them is Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga who is presently the President of Latvia but who was a professor at McGill University in Canada.

as metaphor. In this chapter, I am indebted to the thought of Sallie McFague on the nature of metaphor and its use in speaking about God. In this chapter, the various pieces of my project; the Godsongs, Process thought, metaphor and preaching will come together. The final chapter will be summary and conclusion.

CHAPTER I

THE LATVIAN GODSONGS: GOD'S PRESENCE IN NATURE AND IN DAILY WORK

Introduction

It is my thesis that the imagery of the Latvian Godsongs can provide insight for preaching God's presence in daily life. To test the thesis, I will examine what the songs say about the way God relates to the world and to creation; I will also ask how God's presence makes a difference in the daily life of the singer of the songs. First, however, it is necessary to provide a brief background about the songs themselves and the historical circumstances that gave them birth. After looking at the context of the songs, I will look at their text, at their view of God and the world. I will show how God is both transcendent and immanent; present and hidden at the same time. In the cosmology of the songs, God is literally transcendent because God dwells in the starry heavens. God has qualities of power and wisdom both in Godself and in God's relationship with creation. Power and wisdom, seen as order in nature and felt as presence in daily life, in work and in rest, are the ways that God is made manifest in and to creation. God's presence in nature is seen in the beauty of the world; God's presence in work gives meaning to daily tasks and also gives joy.

The Godsongs and Their Historical Context

The Latvian Godsongs are part of a larger opus of folksongs that were written down in the last half of the nineteenth century and published between 1895 and 1914. Until that time, the songs were an oral tradition; for thousands of years they had been passed from one generation to another by the peasant people who lived in the countryside. The songs are an expression of a rural and pastoral society. They are also, as I will explain below, songs of an oppressed people; it is only in the late nineteenth century that Latvian peasants gained their freedom. However, freedom did not bring prosperity and rural life was hard. More and more people moved to cities to search for a better life and when they got there, they forgot their country songs. There was a real danger that the songs would be lost forever. Fortunately, there were people who recognized this danger and decided to preserve their folk traditions. The middle of the nineteenth century was a time of romantic national awakening in quite a number of European countries. Many Latvian young people had studied in Germany and were inspired to bring this spirit back to their own country. Students, local teachers and others went out to the countryside and began to collect songs that were still alive in the memory of old people. These songs were then sent to a man called Krišjānis Barons who classified and ordered the songs according to subject matter and then published them in several volumes. This work of collecting folksongs did not

stop with the publication of Barons' book. In 1972 there were around 1,200,000 songs registered in the archives of the Language and Literature Institute in Riga.¹

The sheer number of songs tells us that singing was a very important part of life for the common people, the peasants who gave us these folksongs. They were folk who could not record their history in writing, so it is in song that the Latvian people expressed their experiences and feeling about their world. As folk life became more difficult, folksongs flourished. According to folklorists, some of the folksongs may go back to the seventh century, but "the golden age" of the song tradition began in the thirteenth century.² The 13th century is also the time when the people of Latvia lost their independence. German merchants, seeking to expand their territory, found their way to Latvia. Because the indigenous people were pagan, the merchants asked the Pope to authorize a Crusade to Christianize the Baltic region. The crusaders fought and defeated the local peoples and the Germans became the rulers of the land. They established residences in the countryside and the peasants lost their land and also their freedom. Increasingly greater restrictions were put into place. The darkest period for the common folk began in 1710 when Russia conquered the Germans and became the new rulers. The Russian Czar allowed the German landlords to remain and gave them new rights over the peasants; they could now be bought and sold at the whim of the landlord. In 1719 a law was passed that allowed the landlord to

¹ Jēkabs Vīrolis, Latviešu mūzikas vēsture (Latvian music history) (Riga: Liesma, 1972), 7.

² Arvids Ziedonis, Jr., The Religious Poetry of Janis Rainis (Waverly, Iowa: Latvju Grāmata, 1968), 32.

cut off the ear or nose of a fleeing peasant and to brand his forehead.³ In 1777 a German pastor wrote, “a servant can be bought for 30-50 rubles silver; an artisan, cook or weaver for anything up to 100 rubles; the same price is asked for a whole family . . . children can be bought for 4 rubles each. Agricultural workers and their children are sold or bartered for horses, dogs, pipes, etc.”⁴ This period of ever increasing oppression is also the period when the folksongs flowered. It is interesting to note that as the social conditions slowly improved over the course of the next century, the folksongs lost their importance in the life of the peasant. As we have already noted, the nineteenth century collectors of the songs worried that the old people would die before their knowledge of the folksongs could be recorded.

The folksongs are a record of an oppressed people and many of the songs in the Barons' collection sing of the hardships of life, of hard work and long hours, of harsh masters, of orphans who are left alone with nobody to care for them. In this context, it is surprising that the Godsongs say relatively little about oppression in a direct way, although they do speak of it indirectly, mainly by obstinately speaking about God in a way that is different from the Catholicism or Lutheranism (in successive periods) of the feudal landlords. The German pastors preached obedience to the human lord of the land, often in German; it is not surprising that this message did not win the hearts and minds of the peasant people who continued to cling to their old view of God.

³ Alberts Ozols, *Latvijas vēsture* (History of Latvia) (New York: Amērikas Latviešu Apvienība, 1979), 117.

⁴ Arvīds Ziedonis, 65.

In the pre-Christian understanding of the Latvian peasant, God is both transcendent and immanent. One of the songs speaks about God coming down from the mountain, slowly, slowly. God comes down from above. The quality of “aboveness” refers both to God’s dwelling place but also to the qualities of God which are wisdom and power. In the songs, God is literally (mythically) and figuratively higher than the world. Although the transcendence of God is important to the cosmology of the songs, it is God’s immanence that they celebrate. God comes down from the mountain; God is present in the world. However, because God comes slowly, slowly, this presence is not obvious. God is hidden in presence. This hidden presence is manifest in nature and also in daily life, in work and rest. This chapter will examine the songs, first, *to understand how they see God; how they express God’s transcendence, wisdom and power.* After that, it will look at the way that *God relates to the world; how God’s power and wisdom are present/hidden in nature and in everyday life.* Finally, it will seek to discover how the *singers saw themselves within the relationship of God-world what difference that made in the daily life of the peasant folk.*

God Above the World: the Transcendent God

In the ancient Latvian religion, God transcends the world both literally and figuratively. Literally, because God’s dwelling place is not here on this earth, his home is in the sky.⁵ In the songs, God is pictured riding in the heavens on a horse that has a blanket made of stars. The daughter of the sun, who also lives in

⁵ In the mythic world of the songs, God is not spirit; God is male, so I will use the masculine pronoun.

the heavens, wears starry mittens on her hands and when God gets on his horse to come down to earth, she opens heaven's gate.

Lēni, lēni Dieviņš jāja	Slowly, slowly God rides
No kalniņa lejiņā:	Down from the mountain
Saules meita vārtus vēra	The sun's daughter opens the gate
Zvaigžņu cimdi rociņā.	Starry mittens on her hand.

33684 *

It is interesting to note, that even when the songs sing of God in Godself, that is, in the sky, there is an association with the earthly and ordinary reality of farm life; when farm animals are brought home from pasture, someone from the household has to open the gate so that the shepherd can herd them into the farmyard.

The previous song, in its imagery, associates God with the starry sky. The name for God in Latvian, *Dievs*, comes from an ancient Indo-European root word which means "bright light."⁷ In the oral tradition of the songs, words can change in transmission, but certain expressions and phrases seem to remain constant. Imagery that is meaningful to both the singer and the hearer will tend to be passed down without change. It is intriguing to imagine that the original meaning of God's name, "bright light," may have inspired a very early singer to sing about God who lived in the starry sky and that this image may have lived on in the songs long after Latvians no longer knew the etymology of their name for God. In the cosmology of the songs, God is literally transcendent because he lives in the starry sky, but God is also figuratively "above" the world in the qualities of wisdom and power. This is one of the few Godsongs that mention the human

⁶ Ernests Brastiņš, *Latvju Dievadziesmas* (Latvian godsongs) (n. p. : Raven Printing, 1980), 49. Krišjānis Barons, the person who first organized the folksongs by category, gave each a number that is still used whenever the songs appear in writing.

⁷ Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, *Dzintara kalns* (The Amber mountain) (Montreal: Helios, 1989), 100.

lords of the land in a direct way. God's power is above their power because they are creatures, but it is above also because God's power is not oppressive.

Augsti dzied cirulītis	The lark sings above
Par visiem putniņiem.	All other birds.
Augsta Dieva valdīšana	God's rule is above
Par visiem kundziņiem.	All the lords.

33649

This song and the following one are so similar that they can be considered variants of the same song; one sings of God's power, the other of wisdom. This tells us that the concepts of divine wisdom and power were closely related in the mind of the folksinger.

Augstāk dzied cīrulītis	The lark sings above
Aiz visiem putniņiem,	All other birds,
Dievam gudris padomiņš	God's wisdom is above
Par šo visu pasaulīti.	This whole world.

33648

Just as God's power was different from the world's power, so too is God's wisdom not the world's wisdom. Both wisdom and power are qualities of God who is "above." At the same time, the word for wisdom, *padomiņš*, is in the diminutive form. To a modern mind, it seems to be a contradiction in concepts; God's Wisdom (dim.): To the world of the songs, however, God's wisdom is "dear wisdom," it is part of the humble world of the singer. Wisdom is available to humble people. In prose language, *padomiņš*, would translate as good advice, wise advice; it is only the Godsongs that call it a quality of God, the quality of high wisdom.

These songs are examples of the way that the ancient folksinger saw God who transcends the world. God and the world are not the same. The beauty of the starry sky is a sign of God's presence but God is not the starry sky. The poetic imagination of the singer sees the beauty and feels God's presence. God also transcends the world in power and in wisdom and we will see that, in contrast to the ways of the world, God shares both wisdom and power with the world. In this sharing, the singer also feels God's presence. God dwells above the world and God's power and wisdom are also above that of the world. However, God does not spend much time in the above because, as the song tells us, God comes down from the mountain.⁸

God and the World: The Relational God

God is Present and Hidden in Nature

God relates to the world in the sharing of power and wisdom. As we have already seen, for the Latvian peasant, God's power is different from that of the human lords. For instance, God is the creator of all that exists in the world, human and non-human. An amusing song says that the singer may not kick a dog or even a piece of firewood because the dog and the wood are created by God. The word for "created" (*laists*), which is used in that song has the connotation of freedom, of letting go. God is not seen as holding on to what God creates; God creates for freedom.

⁸ The fact that Latvia does not have any high mountains may account for the fact that God always was near.

Freedom shared is also part of God's wisdom that is made manifest in the order of nature, because it is only in freedom that nature can be fruitful, as this next song tells us.

Kam tie kalni, kam tie leji,	Whose mountains, whose valleys,
Kam tie zaļie ozoliņi?	Whose green oak trees?
Dievam kalni, Dievam leji,	God's mountains, God's valleys,
Bitei zaļi ozoliņi.	The bee's green oak trees.

33671

In the harsh reality of the singers everyday life, not only the land but everything on it belonged to the human lord. Nothing was free. It could be bought and sold, traded and degraded. In contrast to this reality, the song envisions a different world as seen from "above." In this world, the mountains, valleys belong to God the creator, but God raises up the humble little bee by giving it the tree that it needs for a home. God is willing to share. God creates for freedom and shares creation in order that it may be fruitful. The bees need the oak tree in order that they may make their honey and this is God's order that is visible in the world of nature. It is the way that the singer of the song saw God's wisdom and power.

God's order, which is wisdom and power shared, tells us about God's relationship to the world and also about the singer's relationship to God-in-the-world.

Opača, mīļš Dieviņš,	Opača, dear God,
Tu augšām, es zemē:	You are above, I am below:
Tu man devi rudzus, miežus,	You give me rye and barley,
Es baroju kumeliņus.	I give it to the horses.

33686

This song is about rye and barley and horses, the ordinary, everyday realities of life in the countryside. However, in the eyes of the singer, the mundane reality is transformed into God's intended order and harmony in the world. In this song, God is above but in the poetic vision of the singer, God is not far away. God's order allows her to discern God's presence in her life; God gives good things and expects her to share them. In this way God who is "above," lets us know that what is "below" also is somehow part of the "aboveness" of God. This is the way that God relates to the world, by sharing. When humans share, they reflect God's way of relating. This is God's intended order and harmony.

In the songs, God the creator is necessarily present to all of creation; without God's help, nothing works and the order of nature breaks down:

Vai, Dieviņ, ko darišu,	Oh, God, what will I do.
Man Dieviņš nelīdzēja.	God did not help me.
Sausa malka man nedega,	Dry firewood will not burn,
Zaļa birze nelapoja.	Live trees do not have leaves.

54624

In God's presence, as we have seen and will see again in the songs about work, even a world filled with difficulty can be blessed. When God is seen as absent, even things that should work do not. God's presence is basic and necessary to all that is, for human life and even for firewood and for trees. There is blessing that comes with God's presence and without this constant presence nothing is possible. God creates and lets go, but at the same time, God's blessing is constant in creation. Nothing that is can exist without God, nothing can be fruitful without God.

God's presence in nature is paradoxical in nature. Nature reveals God but at the same time, God is also hidden in nature.

Kas tas bija, kas atnāca	Who was it who came by here
Ar pelēku mētelīti?	In his gray coat?
Tas atnes kokiem lapas	He brought leaves for the trees,
Zemei zaļu āboliņu.	Green clover for the earth.

30063

In Latvia where the skies are often overcast, it is clear that God who wears a gray coat is not easy to see. God is present but it takes a poetic soul and a sense of wonder to feel God's presence. Again, it is the ordinary that manifests God who is not seen directly but only after the effect. God's presence is felt through blessing, through the gifts of beauty and fruitfulness. In addition, since clover grows in pasture land and is food for cattle who in turn give milk for humans to drink, the song also hints at the sharing that is part of the divine order. This order tells the singer that God was near, very near even if he or she could not see God directly. God is hidden and present at the same time.

This hiddenness is, I believe, the inspiration for this song, which was obviously sung by a woman with a lively and imaginative mind:

Dieviņš bija mazs vīriņš	God was a little man
Gudris viņa padomīpis,	Great is his wisdom,
Viņš varēja priedi vērt,	He can spin a pine tree,
Ozoliņu šķeterēt.	And twine an oak.

33652

It is most unusual, even for the Godsongs, to call God a "little man," but it does present a picture of hiddenness, especially if he is hidden at a spinning wheel,

making oaks out of two pieces of yarn and spinning up a pine tree. God is doing “women’s work,” and that is truly hidden.

The transcendent God who has wisdom and power is revealed in nature; God and nature are not the same thing, but the natural world speaks of God the creator. God is present all around; the order of nature speaks of God who relates to the world by sharing his power and wisdom and who expects the singer to share God’s gifts as well. In this way, the singer participates in God’s order. In contrast to the harsh order of the human lords, God’s order gives the gift of freedom. God shares creation; the ways of the landlord are not God’s ways. God is also hidden in nature but, to the singer who views the world with wonder and attentiveness, the ordinary reveals God. God is present in the wonder.

God is Present and Hidden in Work

In the previous section, God was seen working at a spinning wheel. While it is unusual for God to be doing what was considered women’s work, the songs often speak about God who works in the fields.⁹ God clears the land and prepares it to receive the seeds, then God sows the seeds, wheat for the peasant and weeds for the landlord! God also works the fields of the poor widow who has nobody to help her. After the grain has started to grow, God walks the fields to bring blessing. God ensures the fruitfulness of the earth by actually working in the world.

⁹ Haralds Biezais, Die Gottesgestalt der Lettischen Volksreligion (The image of God in Latvian folkreligion) (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1961), 137.

Once the seeds are sown and fruitfulness is assured, God does not work directly, but is present with those who work, both human and non-human. God helps in all daily tasks and people remind each other of God's help when they greet each other in the morning. The songs tell us that, just as sunrise is the first light of the day, the first word in the morning is Godhelps, *Dievspalīdz*.

Aust gaismiņa, lec saulīte,	Dawn and sunrise,
Tas pirmais gaišumiņš,	First light of day,
Labrītī, Dievspalīdz,	Good morning, Godhelps
Tā pirmā valodiņa.	First words that day.

3029

This custom is still alive; even today, in rural Latvia, people will greet each other by saying *Dievspalīdz*.

God worked the fields and remains a helping presence to those who continue the work that God started. Every daily task, threshing the wheat, milling the flour, baking bread, watching over cows, sheep or horses in their pastures, has a song that asks God to be with the people doing the work.

Nāc, Dieviņ, pats palīdzi	Come, dear God, come and help,
Gŗūta darba padzīvāt.	My work is hard.
Tev, Dieviņ, spēks, varīte,	You have strength and might,
Tev gudrais padomiņš.	You have wisdom.

6933

Darbinieks Dievu lūdza	The worker prays to God
Nedēļīgu iesākdams,	As he begins the week,
Palīdz, Dievs, pirmu dienu,	Help me, God, this first day
Palīdz visu nedēļīgu.	Help me all week long.

31649

In work, just as in nature, God is present in the sharing of divine power and wisdom. The word for wisdom, *padomiņš*, is in the diminutive form in all the songs, but this particular song also used the diminutive for God's power, *varīte*. God relates to creation in God's power, not by dominating but by empowering the weak. God shares divine power every moment of the week because God is always present in and with work. God's help is experienced gradually and constantly:

Dievs man deva, Dievs man deva,	God gave, God gave,
Dievs rokā neiedeva,	God did not put it in my hand.
Dievs man deva pa soļam,	God gave at every step,
Pa soliņa galiņam.	At the end of every step.

54670

At the beginning of each step and at the end of each step, God is there constantly helping. God is a constant presence. This constant presence can make God difficult to perceive, especially if God arrives in the world in a quiet way:

Lēni, lēni Dieviņš brauca	Slowly, slowly God comes
No kalniņa lejiņa,	Down from the mountain.
Netraucēja iervas ziedu,	Not a cherry blossom is disturbed,
Ne arāja kumeliņu.	Not the horse at the plow.

33683

The first two lines of this song, *slowly, slowly and rides down from the mountain* are word patterns that occur in many of the Godsongs. Their ubiquity tells us that the songs see God who comes into the world and is present in the world, in such a quiet way that God's presence is not always felt. If God were to arrive in a flash

of lightning, nature and work would be disturbed, so God comes slowly, slowly. God blesses nature in the lovely fragrant *ieva* flower and the non-human worker, the horse in the field.

At other times, God's presence is discovered only after the fact:

Te gulēj'si pieguļnieki,	This is where the horsemen slept,
Te kūruši uguntiņu,	Here they made a fire.
Te Dieviņš sildijās	This is where God sought warmth,
Te palicis mētelītis.	Here he left his coat.

30074

In summer, horses were brought to far pastures to feed but they could not be left there unprotected from the wolves. Young men would stay with them and guard them. In the cold of night, they would have made a fire for warmth. Because God was with them, God is also warmed by the fire, so much so, that he takes off his coat and leaves it to be found in the morning. God is not seen directly, but God does leave signs of presence so that the singer will know that God was there.

God is present in work because God works. God is also present as help for human and non human workers; the horse in the field is blessed by God passing gently by. Because God works, work—in and of itself—has value and because it has value and because God helps, the worker can work with joy.

Dieviņš prieka nevarēja	God could not contain his joy
Pa pagalmu staigādams	Walking in the yard
Kūlā dzied kūlējiņi,	Threshers sang threshing
Maltuvē malējiņas.	Millergirls milling.

28779

Joy is God's gift to the people who work; the gift of presence that hallows the mundane. Even hard physical work, such as threshing and milling which were done by hand, becomes an occasion of joy because it is blessed by God's presence. The songs that express the workers joy become their gift to God, they give God happiness. God shares in happiness, but God is present in times of adversity as well. God hears songs of lament as well as songs of happiness.

Dievam sūdzu vāju druvu	I cry to God of poor land
Dievam vāju kumeliņu.	I tell God of a weak horse.
Vai no Dieva, ne no Dieva	Is this from God or not from God?
Dievam sūdzu raudādama.	I cry out to God.

7191; 109

This song of lament affirms God who is present. Because God works the fields and blesses creation, the singer is perplexed about her misfortune; does it come from God or not? The song does not try to answer the question, it is a cry from the heart.

Human Response to God's Presence: The Singer in God's World

So far, I have examined the way that God relates to the world; God comes down from the mountain and is present in the order of nature, God works in the world and helps others who work. God shares power and wisdom and expects humans to share as well. Even when God is hidden, in nature and in work, God is always and necessarily present. This is the way God is with the world. How does the singer of the Godsongs respond to this presence? What is the

relationship of the singer to God? It is interesting to note that God is never called Lord in the songs; even though God has divine power and wisdom, God is always God, *Dievs*, or *Dieviņš*, in the diminutive form. This can be translated as “little God,” or “dear God.” The Latvian language is filled with diminutives; mountains, valleys, the sun and moon, trees, animals, fathers, mothers, orphans—all are “little.” Partly, then, this diminution is idiomatic. In the songs, which are poems with a set meter, it may also be that an extra syllable was needed. However, as we have seen with God’s power and wisdom, the diminutive serves to emphasize the difference between the worldly which is oppressive and the divine which is empowering. God, in all of God’s power and wisdom, is a gentle presence in all aspects of daily life. God is close. *Dievs* is God’s name and just as Ann may become Annie or Martin may become Marty, so *Dievs* becomes *Dieviņš*. It is an expression of closeness and love.

The closeness and love of *Dieviņš* is present in a special way in songs about orphans. They are the poorest of the poor, the ones who are seemingly left out of the relational world where God is present. Their lot is so hard that their tears form the fog that rises from the fields in the morning. To the songs, however, orphans and their tears are precious to God.

Bārenīša asariņas
 Ļk rītiņa miglu met;
 Dieviņš visas tās salasa
 Sudrabiņa laiviņā.

Orphans’ tears
 Become the morning fog;
 God gathers every tear
 In a boat made of silver.

In the view of the songs, God's liberating power helps to overcome oppression.

The orphan songs tell us that all oppression is not overcome, but that God is present and that God experiences the tears of the least of the least.

God's closeness and love is also expressed in happy songs such as this one:

Ko, Dieviņ, tu domāji?	What are you thinking about, God?
Es domāju visu labu.	I think only good things.
Es domāju zirgu jāt,	I think I will ride a horse,
Netecēt kājiņām.	Instead of walking.

29791

The singer, who is a young girl, trusts that *Dieviņš* is truly interested in her thoughts and feelings. The transcendent God does come down from the mountain. God's wisdom that orders nature is also the wisdom of good advice, it can help the singer decide if riding is a better idea than walking. God cares about the smallest of mundane things. God receives the large problems of the world and also the little ones.

Dieviņš is part of the singer's world, someone who is close and who cares. In return, the singer also loves and even worries about God.

Kur, Dieviņ, tu paliksi,	What will you do, dear God,
Kad mēs visi nomirsim?	When we all die?
Ne tev tēva, ne māmiņas,	You have no father or mother,
Ne tev savas līgaviņas.	No bride of your own.

33679

A variant of this song asks who will work the land when we all die; these songs tell us that, not only is God necessary for our lives, but that we are also necessary for God. God needs our love, God needs our care for the earth.

Summary

In the cosmology of the Godsongs, God transcends the world and God is immanent in the world. God's presence is revealed in nature and hidden in nature; it is also revealed and hidden the daily life of the peasant, in work. The mundane is transformed into signs of God's presence by the gift of wonder, and hard work reveals God's helping presence in the doing. God is part of daily life.

The mythic view of God in the songs tells us that God rides a horse in the starry skies and that God comes down to earth in order to work in the fields. God is a person and the personal God relates to the world. The beauty of the heavens and the fruitfulness of the earth are signs of God, but it is the relationality of God that is experienced as presence. God is experienced as shared wisdom and shared power. Shared wisdom is the order of nature which tells humans that they too must share with others, human and non-human because all are created by God. In daily work, God helps the workers, one step at a time because God is there at the beginning of the step and at the end of the step. In this way, God's presence becomes apparent in the doing of the work and God's power empowers the worker. Again, God shares the divine qualities, in contrast to the ways of the world.

The mythic view of God in the Godsongs is unusual because it tells about God who works. Another extraordinary aspect of the songs is their use of the diminutive form to talk about God. This does not mean that God is diminished; God is always above all that exists. It does mean that this same transcendent God is personal; that God has a relationship with the singer and the singer also has a relationship with God. God is part of every aspect of life; God listens and cares about sorrows, great and small just as God shares joy, great and small. The singer also cares and worries about God.

The songs are the experience of people who live in God's presence in their daily lives and with oppression in their daily lives. They reflect both as one whole, as paradox. The songs that tell of God's power and wisdom do so in contrast with the experience of domination power. The songs that express lament, especially the orphan songs, also strongly affirm God's presence and care. They live life as it is.

Visi ļaudis ta sacīja,
Kas dos lietu no nelietas?
Dievs dod lietu no nelietas,
Paliks lieta nelieta.

People ask
Who will bring good from no-good?
God will bring good from no-good,
Good will remain in no-good.

9048

CHAPTER 2

THE GODSONGS AS MYTH AND POETRY

In the previous chapter I examined the content of the Godsongs and found that God was a very real presence in the daily experience of the ancient Latvian people. Because God was a part of their life, they could find beauty in God's world and joy in work. In this chapter, I will look at the way that the folksongs communicated in their own time, when they were an oral tradition and then, how they communicate with us today when they are written poetry.

The folksongs are folklore, an oral tradition that goes back eight centuries.¹ As folklore, they live in the outer reality of the world and at the same time, they live in the inner reality of the singer's experience. These are not two different realities, they are made one in the artistic expression of the song. This integrated reality tells us about the way that the folksinger perceived God-and-the-world, they express a cosmology; they are a mythic way of seeing. The songs live in this mythic reality, they look at it from the inside and communicate it to their own time.

Today, the folksongs are no longer an oral tradition, they are written lyric poetry. Their mythic world is no longer ours; we must enter their world from the outside and allow them to communicate in a different way. This chapter will examine the ways that we may enter the world of the songs by looking at them in their various aspects of *lyric poetry, folklore, oral tradition and myth*, each of

¹ Arvīds Ziedonis, 32.

which illuminates the songs from a slightly different angle. In their nature as *lyric poetry*, the songs celebrate the “inscape” of their world; not the world in general but that of particular experience in its depth. This deep insight invites the listener to share in the vision of the poet and liberates the imagination of the hearer to participate in this vision. Because the songs are *folklore*, they enjoy a certain freedom to improvise, they prize novelty. They live in the mundane world and celebrate the ordinary, the daily. They are born in shared experience and passed down to others who add new experience, layer by thin layer. Because they are passed down by hearing and remembering, they are an *oral tradition*. This influences both the form of the song which is traditional and short, and also the way in which the poet sees and communicates his or her world. In order to be remembered, images must be vivid and evocative. The oral tradition depends on the hearer to “complete” the poem in the imagination. Lastly, the songs are *myth*, a way of seeing the world, of God’s order in the world and the singer’s place in that order. As myth, the songs are evocative, they point to a reality beyond outer reality. This view of the world has been called “magical realism.” When the songs were a living and oral tradition, they both reflected and formed the views of the community. Today, the songs are part of the Latvian heritage and the insights that they provide can be appropriated for our, quite different, world.

The Godsongs as Lyric Poetry

The Godsongs were originally songs, just as their name implies.² Mothers sang them to their infants, women sang together at their work in the household, youngsters sang as they watched over cows or sheep in the pasture, men sang as while they threshed. In winter, when the sun set early and the evening hours were long, the extended household would gather to *vakarēt*, to “evening” together. In the dim and flickering light women and men engaged in various crafts of sewing, weaving, woodwork to make all the practical daily necessities for everyday life on the farm and in the household. (In one of the songs that I have chosen to look at in this chapter, the singer asks God to come “vakarēt” with her.) This was also a time for singing together.³ Singing to babies, singing at work, singing in the evenings, this is the way that the songs were transmitted from generation to generation, by being a part of daily life.

Even though the songs were truly songs in the past, in their natural environment, they have come down to us today as poetry. The only way to transcribe the songs when they were collected in the nineteenth century was by hand and, although some melodies were written down, most of the collectors recorded only the words.⁴ To a Latvian speaker today, the word “folksong” can refer either to a real song with a melody or to the poetic verses that are preserved in the Barons and other large collections; the songs have come to be seen and used as lyric poetry.

² Viķe-Freiberga, *Amber Mountain*, 27.

³ This is a tradition that lives on. Even today, when Latvians gather, singing is a favorite activity.

⁴ There are over 80,000 verses in the first published collection of songs and only 6,000 melodies. Today folklorists recognize the importance of knowing the whole songs, words and music. Various Latvian researchers are trying to restore the folksongs to their original wholeness.

Lyric poetry celebrates experience, full and personal experience. It has been described as “the vivid realization of the ‘inscape’ of things.”⁵ This *insight* into the *inscape* frees the poet to see beyond the banal, to see underneath the surface into the depth of experience. The poet lives in the everyday world with an ethos of encounter, with attentiveness to the uniqueness and otherness of experience and communicates this uniqueness and otherness to the reader.⁶ No experience is too ordinary or too unimportant. The poet lives in the moment and is attentive to the singularity of that moment and thereby transforms it with the “inwardness” of the poetic vision.⁷ This folksong is an example of the inscape of reality.

Nāc, Dieviņ, Tu pie manis,
Šovakar vakarēt,
Balti mani liepasgaldi,
Tīra mana istabiņ.

Come, dear God, to my house,
Come “evening” with me,
My linden table is white,
My room is prepared.

2700

The surface reality of this song is an unremarkable room where the household gathers in the winter evenings to sing and work together around the table. There is nothing extraordinary about this reality, it is daily life. However, the song does not stay on the surface. It encounters the daily and lifts it up, celebrates it. It is this daily life, precisely this mundane reality as seen deeply by the poet, that can become a place of encounter with God. The song is attentive to reality in a deeper way; the room probably is not large and it certainly is not grand, but that is not

⁵ Nathan A. Scott, Jr., The Broken Center: Studies in the Theological Horizon of Modern Literature (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 178. Scott quotes Gerard Manley Hopkins.

⁶ Scott, Broken Center, 99.

⁷ Viķe-Freiberga, Amber Mountain, 52.

what the song sees. It sees the loving and careful preparation, the cleaning, the scrubbing. It concentrates on these small details, “it loves the particular”⁸ and, by loving it, makes the particular speak to a larger reality. Though the poetic device of synecdoche, the clean room and the white table represent the loving preparation of the singer for God to come “evening” and this preparation tells us that the singer really expects God’s presence. It represents her faith that God is a reality for her life. Attentiveness to the singularity of small details brings depth the vision of the song and this depth allows the song to extend beyond its concrete experience.

The song invites God to come “evening,” to be present in the work and the singing of the household. It invites God into its world, but it invites the hearer as well. The hearer is invited to share in the hope and the faith in God’s presence. The song does not instruct or even explain, it simply tells about a particular experience and shares this with us. In doing so, the song liberates our imagination and enables us to see deeply as it does. Not everyone has the gift of poetic expression, but the songs assume that we all have the gift of attentiveness to the daily, to the depth of everyday reality.

The Godsongs as Folklore

As lyric poetry, the Godsongs have the freedom to express full personal experience. Freedom is also a hallmark of personal experience in folklore, but it is freedom of a different kind. In lyric poetry, the poet is free to see the world

⁸ Amos N. Wilder, Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 42.

deeply, to describe it according to the poetic vision and to communicate this vision. When we read a poem in a book, we participate in the author's experience, but we do not consider changing a word here or a phrase there. The poem belongs to the author. In folklore, the song belongs to the collective living experience of the people. An individual singer receives a song from the tradition and is free to make changes. Improvisation and novelty that reflect present experience are an integral part of this dynamic and collective tradition. Words may be changed in subtle ways, completely new words can be tried out. The singer is free to experiment in this way because she celebrates the moment. The content of the song does not belong to a fixed tradition from which one may not deviate; the tradition is fluid and can respond to new experience. A singer is free to receive a song and pass it on just as she learned it or she may change it; if a newer version appeals to the community, then this is the way it is passed on to others. Many times, however, both versions will survive, which we can see from the many, many variants of any one song that have been recorded. These variants testify to the dynamism of the folkloric tradition and to the freedom of the singer to live in her moment, to reflect her experience in a novel way.

Folklore is a thoroughly communal tradition; the songs are born in personal experience of life in a community, they are shared with others in the community and then they are passed down over time, giving them to yet another generation of the community. Because of the freedom to vary the songs, they can and do reflect the changing worldview of the people; the old experience is shared with the new experience and is transformed. Folklore is like a pearl where each

succeeding generation adds a new, thin layer to that which exists and thereby adds to the beauty of the whole.

The Godsongs as Oral Tradition

The Godsongs were not received by their singers in written form until the early part of the twentieth century. That means that for more than eight hundred years they were an oral tradition. The vast number of songs testifies to the liveliness of the tradition, to its value for the community, and also to the fact, that in some way, the singers of the songs had discovered strategies to make them easy to remember. This is probably the reason why the structure of the songs, their meter, rhythm and length does not change.⁹ With a few exceptions, they are four lines long.

The structure of the verse is traditional and unchanging; the contents, as we have already seen, change constantly. The tradition is dynamic and it is also ephemeral. It is dynamic because there is no traditional limitation of what may be expressed; it is ephemeral because it lives in the moment and then is gone. The singer must find ways to make the song linger in the memory of the hearer. These ways have to do with both content and the way that the content is expressed. Both content and means of expression will differ in poetry that is meant to be read and poetry that is meant to be heard. In written verse, the eye can go back and reread a word or a line that was forgotten. In addition, the reader can savor many small details because they add to the richness of the picture that the poet is painting with words. Vaira Vīķe Freiberga compares this mode of writing to a

⁹ Vīķe-Freiberga, Amber Mountain, 37.

Flemish still life painting, where each flower is carefully and colorfully rendered, even including a bee in one of the blossoms.¹⁰ This type of communication is artist centered; the viewer or reader, in the case of poetry, receives the artistic vision of the poet. In oral poetry this is not possible. If the hearer misses a word or a line, that word or line is gone. The ear may hear a wealth of detail, but the mind will not remember. Orally transmitted verse must rely on different means of communication. Oral communication depends on the hearer to be an active participant in the artistic process. The poet achieves this participation by using imagery that is *simple, vivid, clear and evocative*.¹¹ In the folksongs, the image is *simple* because, instead of the many rich details favored by written poetry, the song will lift up a single image. The image is *clear* because it will be expressed in simple everyday words. *Vividness* is the gift of the singer to see what others may not perceive, to see deeply and express that deep reality beyond the mundane and the banal. Last of all, the image is *evocative* when it elicits a reaction in the mind of the hearer. The song depends on the hearer to complete the poetic process, it brings the hearer into the world of the song with an attitude of shared experience. The singer is a part of the same world, the same reality as the hearer.

Pamazām es dzīvoju,
 Pamazām Dievs palīdz,
 Pamazām bite nesa,
 Pa vienam ziedīņam.

Little by little I live my life,
 Little by little God helps,
 Little by little the bee carries,
 One little flower at a time.

34278

¹⁰ Viķe-Freiberga, Amber Mountain, 38.

¹¹ Viķe-Freiberga, Amber Mountain, 45

We can see that repetition and plays on words are other poetic devices used by the songs to facilitate memory. The word *pamazām* is the first word in the first three lines. The (overly)literal translation of *pamazām* is, “by little,” and the fourth lines starts with a play on that word, *pa vienam*, which means “by one.” Each line starts with the same thought and the slight variation in the third line adds spice and enlivens the poetic strategy.

The imagery of the song meets all of the requirements of simplicity, clarity, vividness and evocativeness. The *simplicity* of the song lies in the single image, or metaphor, of the little bee who brings nectar to make honey, one flower at a time. The imagery is *clear* because the experience is part of the hearers’ life, it is something known. The songs often speak of God who helps one step at a time, one day at a time, or, as here, little by little. This is part of the hearers world, it is also part of the songs that she knows. The little bee is also familiar to people who live in rural areas. The *vividness* of the imagery lies in the fact that the humble little bee is lifted up as an example of God’s love that provides; the bee gives honey that is good to eat and wax for candles—all this, one flower at a time. The blessing of God’s help, little by little, and the bee who is so small and yet gives gifts to humans, are images that *evoke* a response from the hearer and will invite the hearer into the song to form his or her own images of God’s help and presence. It invites the hearer to think about God who provides in wondrous ways, about the way that he might be useful to the community. Also, little by little, it invites the hearer to consider how she might add richness to her life, with God’s help.

The previous paragraph is a good illustration of the difference between written communication and oral communication. My short exegesis, which is *my* analysis, is writer oriented. The freedom of the reader, while certainly not denied, must reckon with my thoughts about the song. Oral communication is free and intuitive, the song does not analyze, it provides insight and then simply allows the hearer to form pictures and associations in the imagination. The ephemeral nature of oral communication gently encourages the hearer to be attentive, to match the attentiveness of the singer/poet. This attentiveness that is characteristic of lyric poetry is the deep encounter of the poet with particular experience. When the insight that results from that deep encounter is communicated orally, the listener must enter into that encounter with the same intensity as that of the poet. In this intensity that the hearer becomes part of the poetic process.

The Godsongs as Myth

Myth as a Grid on Reality

The Godsongs tell us about the cosmology of the Latvian peasant folk, about the way that they saw God, the way they saw their world, how they saw God's order in the world and how they saw their place in God's order. In other words, the songs depict a cosmology, a myth that interprets the world, a hermeneutic through which they interpret their experience. They tell the story of the Latvian people, their joys and their sorrows, their celebrations and their lament, all aspects of daily life in light of God's constant presence. They seek to understand God's order for the world, an order that they see manifested all around

in nature and its processes, in creation. Nature “speaks” to the singer of the songs about God and she expresses the wonder of that “speech” in her song.

God is present not only in nature but in every part of life, especially in daily work. God, as creator who made this wonderful world, is more powerful than any earthly power. God as constant presence in the processes of nature is also present to human beings and God’s power is therefore also present and will help the workers in their daily tasks. This is the core of the Godsong myth, but this core truth is not expressed in the abstract as I have just done. The songs are expressions of concrete experience, in light of the myth. No song will tell the whole story, each one is like a small piece of a mosaic that reflects one singer’s experience. Each small concrete experience adds more color and detail to the larger picture that is the myth of the songs.

The Godsong’s particular way of seeing God’s relationship to the world reflects the singers’ experience in their world, a world that was increasingly oppressive. Their view of God, who is never called Lord, who is *Dieviņš*, reflects their experience of oppression from human Lords. Each culture forms its myth in light of its history, so different cultures have different myths. At the same time, Macquarrie has found that the various ancient and mythic ways of seeing the world have certain characteristics in common with each other.¹² I will look at these in light of the Latvian myth, that is through specific songs.

¹² John Macquarrie, God-Talk: An Examination of the Language and Logic of Theology (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 173.

Characteristics of Myth.

The first common feature of myths is that the sacred is not something outside of ordinary experience. It is not removed from the dailiness of life; the sacred and the profane are not two different realities, they are part of an indivisible whole. God is in the world and the world is in God.

Faith is not speculative entering into transcendence. But it determines existence as experience in the world, and thus is not something alongside all that I do and suffer, hope and experience, but something that is concretely present in all, that is it determines all my doing and suffering, hoping and experiencing.¹³

The view of God as presence in the world is typical of the Godsongs. They do not speculate about God in Godself so much as they describe God coming into the world “slowly, slowly.” The sacred presence is necessarily present in all of creation because it is God’s presence that provides order in the world.

Pate Dieva dāvāniņa	All of God’s gifts
Cita citu valkājās,	Help each other
Zirdziņš vilka ecešiņas,	The horse pulls the harrow,
Ecešiņas labībiņu.	The harrow “pulls” the grain.

28087

God’s order is an order of relationality in which God’s gifts help each other, which “pull” together. It is interesting to note that this list includes not only animals and nature but also a tool that the human mind has imagined and

¹³ Nathan A. Scott, Jr., “Theology and the Literary Imagination,” in Adversity and Grace: Studies in Recent American Literature, ed. Nathan A. Scott (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), 6, quoting Gerhard Ebeling, The Nature of Faith, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 159-60.

developed. It would seem that both the tool and the intelligence are gifts of God. God becomes visible in this order in the everyday reality of the singers life. Horses pulling harrows, grain growing are mundane activities, there is nothing in the least extraordinary about them and it is their very ordinariness that speak to her about God, about God's constant presence. In fact, God's presence is the lens through which she observes the world around her and her own place in that world. God's presence is her grid on the reality of her world. ¹⁴

Myths are characterized by action: something happens. Action is not the first word that comes to mind to describe the folksongs with their lyric character. ¹⁵ Certainly something does happen: God comes riding down from the mountain on a horse, God strides through the fields, God laughs in joy. This is action of a very gentle kind; the horse comes down very slowly and carefully in order not to startle creation, after God walks through the fields, they are covered with grain, God laughs with happiness because people are singing at their various daily tasks. The action in the folksongs is complex and subtle. ¹⁶

The language of myth is deep, rich and evocative. Deep and evocative language is characteristic of the songs as poetry, as oral transmission, as folklore and as myth. Language is the mythic whole of the songs. The song that talks about God laughing is a good example:

Dieviņš prieka nevarēja,
Pa pagalmu staigādams,

God was filled with joy,
Walking in the yard,

¹⁴ Macquarrie, 172.

¹⁵ Folktales are also a part of the heritage of the Latvian people and they are full of action.

¹⁶ Wilder, Early Christian Rhetoric, 125.

Kūla dzied kūlējiņi,
Maltuvē malējiņas.

Girls sang while milling,
Young men threshing wheat.

28779

There is a back and forth movement in this song; God is not able to contain his joy and the people at work are not able to contain their songs. God's joy comes from the songs but the songs also come from God's presence. In fact, milling and threshing are physically hard, the workers worked for long hours and much of the fruit of their hard labor went to the feudal landlord. At the same time, the presence of God in that yard enabled them to find joy in the work, to lift their voices and spirits in song. The presence of God and the reality of hard work do not cancel each other out; both are part of the singer's experience. God is reality just as work is reality. The paradox results in a song that is pure joy.

Immediacy. In myths, the symbol and what it symbolizes are not two different things. Folklorists tell us that the ancient peoples saw reality in a different way than we do at present. "Magic realism" are the words that Vaira Vike-Freiberga¹⁷ uses to characterize the world of the songs. The presence of God was experienced and real, it was God's strength that enabled the workers to find joy in hard labor. When the household sang together in the long winter evenings, God was there in the song. This experience of God's presence was the lens through which the peasant people saw all of life.

Dieviņš brida rudzu lauku,
Ar pelēku metelīti,

God walked the fields,
Wearing a gray coat,

¹⁷ Vīke-Freiberga, Amber Mountain, 24.

Kad izbrida tad apsedza,
Pelēkam varpinam.

Covering the fields with
Gray stalks of rye.

32533

It is not the case that the peasant folk who worked the fields on a regular basis thought that wheat magically appeared. They knew, none better, the work of preparing the earth, of sowing, harvesting, threshing. As in the song about the gifts of God that “pull together,” this song tells about God’s presence, necessary and indispensable presence in all that is. The frequently gray and overcast skies of Latvia inspired the imagination of the singer to see God in a gray coat. The gray skies brought rain and the rain brought forth the wheat. The song tells us that, in all of this, God is present in a very real way. In folklore this is “magical realism” and according to Macquarrie,¹⁸ it is pointless to question if this is meant to be literal truth or symbolic because the myth is not subject to analytical thinking. In the Godsongs, it is a view of reality that is based on the experience of God in daily life as help and presence.¹⁹

Myths are alogical, like dreams. The dreamlike quality of myth would be similar to the magic realism of the previous paragraph. In the Godsongs, however, the most alogical aspect is not the content of any one song or group of songs, it is in the songs as a whole, and their meaningfulness for the life of the singers. Singing in the midst of hardship is a way of dealing with hardship. This is a characteristic shared with Negro spirituals. That an oppressed people who

¹⁸ Macquarrie, 173.

¹⁹ Janīna Kursīte, Latviešu folklorā mītu spoguļi (Latvian folklore in the mirror of myth) (Riga: Zinātne, 1996), 166.

labor long and arduously would sing may not be expected, but it is the central reality about the songs. Singing brings God close, happiness is God's will. This is the alogical logic of singing. Singing is a mystical way of seeing God. It lifts the heart and mind to a total awareness of a presence that cannot be felt in any other way.

Supernatural agency is present, not in a physical sense but in a numinous world. This characteristic seems to me to be a contradiction of the characteristic of immediacy. Magical realism could just as well mean numinous realism and would in fact account for the view of the songs more adequately.

Myth lies outside of time. This is true of the content of the songs and also of the fact that they are oral folklore. The content of the songs is concrete, particular experience; "come to my home, God." It is neither abstract nor generalized. It is the expression of a singer, an "I" to a "Thou" and yet, it is timeless because it points to a reality that is bigger than that of the particular experience. The fact that the song is oral folklore also contributes to the aspect of timelessness because each daughter who learned the song from her mother would adapt the song to her own circumstances, making the tradition come alive in her own experience.

Myth is myth only when it is accepted by a community. This characteristic flows from the previous one, that the particular "I" who sings the

song is already formed by a tradition and by a way of seeing reality. When a song is received and found to be true to the new singer's life, it is learned, modified, and passed on. Those songs that are not part of the community worldview tend to die out in an oral tradition. The song, which carries the myth, is formed by being part of the worldview of a people. It then carries this worldview forward to succeeding generations. In other words, "the myths are formative of the life in community, it has a social, communal dimension and is a community's ideology."²⁰ The image of God riding down from the mountain "slowly, slowly" was apparently deeply meaningful for the community because it is present in many variants of the same song. Various singers in different parts of Latvia used the same words in their songs telling us that God's presence was an integral part of the way that they saw their world.

Summary

The Godsongs are lyric poetry, folklore, an oral tradition and myth. In their own world, the songs as poetry communicate by attentiveness to the ordinary, to concrete experience that is seen deeply. As folklore, they share in the freedom of poetry to express any experience, no matter how small. In addition, they may change the words of received tradition in order to live in their moment. Because they are oral tradition, the singer uses vivid imagery so that the song is easy to remember. The images evoke a response from the hearer who "completes" the song in the imagination. The cosmology, or myth, of the Godsongs tells us that God was present in the life of the folk who first sang these songs and also in the lives of those who received the songs from generation to

²⁰ Macquarrie, 173.

generation. The faith of people who thought in mythic ways was living and real. God was not something or somebody apart from their lives; God was a reality that helps them live their lives. This is what Macquarrie calls their ontological core of meaning. This core of meaning, this reality was passed by mother to daughter, father to son and each added new layers to the core. Is it possible for contemporary Latvians to appropriate the core of meaning of the songs and add yet another layer? Can the songs communicate to us today as poetry, as folklore, as myth?

In one sense, it is difficult to see how we may establish a direct continuity with the Godsong tradition. We have not received the folkloric tradition as our ancestors did, naturally, as part of our life in the family and community. The worldview that they express has not been formative of our world as it was for the world of our foremothers and forefathers and our world of today is vastly changed from the one that gave birth to the songs. As an oral tradition, in the past and in their natural environment, the songs changed in subtle ways because they were dynamic and could respond to the experience of the singer. Today the songs no longer evolve as folklore because they have been fixed in writing for almost one hundred years. We learn them as written poetry not as living, ephemeral, dynamic songs. All of this would indicate that we no longer have direct continuity with the songs, that we cannot go home again.

On the other hand, the Godsongs are the story of our people, passed down from generation to generation over hundreds of years. They are our past, part of what made us what we are today and we ignore this to our loss. The mythic world

that they inhabited may no longer be ours, but the rich and evocative poetic language of the songs tells us things about our own reality. The songs give us an identity, that is their gift. As poetry, they invite us into their world, to look deeply at their experience, to be attentive to the ordinary. They draw vivid pictures and allow us to share in the poetic process in our imaginations. We enter into their world and see deeply. The attentiveness that they gently teach makes us see the ordinary in the world in new ways. The world is full of wonder and all things become “new” in their sheer “thereness.”²¹ Attentiveness is the gift of the songs for our world.

As history and as poetry, the songs communicate to the contemporary Latvian; their myth may speak to us as well, not as “magical realism,” but as a metaphoric way of seeing God. Because the songs reflect the ancient Latvian nature religion, the church has been reluctant to use their imagery in worship, however, as I will argue in the next chapter, this is to ignore a rich source of metaphor for the way that God is present in our lives. The traditional metaphors for God, such as King, Father, Lord, are also *metaphors* and metaphor, as Sallie McFague tells us, is a picture of reality;²² it may be a traditional picture, a picture that is meaningful, but it is a picture. The Godsongs are also pictures, vivid and evocative pictures and they may speak to the reality of our world. Through them, we may come to see all the world as God’s good creation and God’s constant presence in that world.

²¹ Scott, *Broken Center*, 203.

²² Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), xi.

CHAPTER 3

PROCESS THOUGHT AND THE GODSONGS

Introduction

In the first two chapters, I examined the content and the form of the Godsongs. In this chapter, I will test my thesis that the songs' way of seeing God's presence in the world is compatible with that of Process thought. In spite of the fact that one is ancient, the other modern, the one speaks from an agrarian worldview, the other in terms of scientific models, the Godsongs and Process thought have much in common. They share the conviction that God is creative presence in the world. Both affirm that God's vision for the world is well-being for the whole and that without God, nothing would exist. Process theologian John Cobb tells us that God is the "ground of life and the life giving principle which is itself alive."¹ In the Godsongs, God is the creator of all things, human and non-human, the one who gives life and fruitfulness. The songs and Process thought share the idea that God is not identified with the world but is necessarily and creatively present in all that exists moment by moment. In both, God's presence is felt as wisdom, power and is a lure for people to participate in God's vision for the world. Process thought orders these ideas in a model that describes the relationship of God and the world. I will sketch this model and then examine how it helps us to understand God's wisdom and power that lure us to participate in God's vision for the world. Then I will recapitulate the view of God found in the

¹ Charles Birch and John B. Cobb, Jr., The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community (Denton, Texas: Environmental Ethics Books, 1990), 195.

Godsongs and examine how their view of God's wisdom and power are an invitation to be co-workers with God for the good of the world. Finally, I will compare the two paradigms for commonalities and also for differences.

Process Thought ²

Process thought begins with human experience which is reciprocal relationality. A baby becomes a little person through relationality with his or her parents and, even though the power of adults is much greater, it is quite clear that a baby also changes the way that parents think of themselves. Both child and parents are transformed within the relationship. Process thought tells us that to be is to be in relationship and this includes the world, non-human world as well as human, and also God. Relationality is ubiquitous. Everything influences everything else.

From this basic insight comes a model of the way that relationality constitutes being. Each moment of being is called an actual entity and it begins by feeling its past. To become present, it weighs and values the past accepting some parts and rejecting others. In ordering the past, the moment needs a criterion for its free choice and in the model, the light of the future is what orders the past and allows it to synthesize itself to become present. However, this presents a problem because the occasion can only feel that which is actual, like the past. The future, by definition is not yet actual. To overcome this difficulty, Process thought proposes a touch of God, tailored especially for the becoming moment, that

² The ideas that are expressed in this section come from my reading of Process thought developed by Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki in God, Christ, Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology, rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

enables it to envision a future for itself. God's lure comes very early in the process of becoming, allowing the moment to value all of the past in its light. The past influences the becoming moment and so does God's future but the moment may freely choose its own synthesis. It may accept or reject any part of the past and any part or even the whole of God's lure for its becoming. As it synthesizes itself and becomes present, the moment instantly becomes the past that will subsequently influence the new becoming moment. This is the model of how the world experiences relationality with itself and with God, through feeling its past, valuing it in light of the future that is represented by God's lure, and freely becoming what it chooses to be.

The model also tells us how God relates to the world. If God's lure is a vision of that which is not yet actual, God must in some way represent the future. Where the world begins with the past, God begins with the future, with possibilities. In the Primordial nature, God envisions an infinity of possibilities and orders them. God's criterion for ordering the future is God's own nature which is goodness, beauty and harmony. The Primordial nature of God is a harmonious order of possibilities. The Consequent nature of God feels the world. When God sends a lure for the world, God participates in the becoming of each and every moment. Upon the completion of the moment, God accepts it into the Consequent nature. Since God knows the moment from the inside, God knows the world just as it knows itself. God's knowledge of the world is perfect. God integrates this perfect knowledge into the infinite harmony of possibilities, valuing and judging that which is against that what might be. From the synthesis

of experience and possibility, or to put it another way, from the unity of God that is the Consequent nature and the Primordial nature, God fashions a lure for each and every actual occasion. God lures the world to its own best good. This lure touches everything that exists, non-human and human, and invites it to become part of God's vision, part of God's beauty and harmony.

The world begins by feeling its past, God begins by feeling possibilities. The world experiences a touch of God, God experiences the becoming moment of the world. It is a dynamic relationship, a constant movement of action and reaction. Moment by moment, the world reacts to God's touch. Moment by moment, God reacts to the world by sending a lure that is truly possible for its condition. In other words, we can say that God is constantly and dynamically present in the world and can make a difference in the way that the world sees itself because the world is constantly present in God. At the same time, God and the world are not identical. God transcends the world, in power and wisdom. The world transcends God because it has the power and freedom to accept, modify or ignore God's lure which can also be seen as God's wisdom.

The Process model allows us to understand power and wisdom in a relational way. God's wisdom is the result of God's perfect knowledge of our condition and of God's infinite vision of possibilities. God knows us from the inside, feels our experience just as we ourselves feel it. At the same time, God also feels every single experience of the world. God in the Consequent nature is the epitome of relationality because everything that is meets in God. This super-relationality allows God to put our experience in context in a way that we

ourselves are simply not able to do. God then takes the whole that is made up of several parts in context into the Primordial nature of infinite possibilities. From the unity of Consequent and Primordial nature, God envisions the very best possibility for each and every becoming moment. Because it is so contextual to itself, to the world and to God's vision, God's touch is a real possibility, one that can become actual through the response of the world. It is creative because it may bring about something new, something that existed only in the mind of God, in hope for the future.

The creativity of God's vision is God's power in the world. In the Process model, divine power is not and cannot be unilateral or coercive. God, in the Primordial nature, is all possibilities in beauty and harmony, but without the world to make possibilities actual, they remain only possibilities. The world has the power to ignore, modify or accept God's vision for itself. But God also has power, in and of Godself. God's power is that of vision. As John Cobb says, "in the midst of sheer givenness," God introduces "an attractive vision of unrealized possibility."³ The attractiveness of the vision is God's creative power. Because God, in the Consequent nature, knows us so well, God fashions a lure that will be call us to beauty and harmony. Because God knows our condition, it will be a lure for the possible and this allows us to hope. The sheer givenness of the world is often that of brokenness. The creativity of God is not only to introduce an attractive vision, but to lure us to participate in it, to dream and to act. In the midst of our brokenness, God allows us to participate in a dream of wholeness.

³ Birch and Cobb, 197.

In Process thought, God is present in the world through wisdom and power. God shares divine wisdom by shining the light of possibility upon our reality and guiding our steps, moment by moment. God shares power by luring us to dream and empowering us to act, moment by moment. God's vision is directed to the world and as we participate in this vision, we too act in and with the world, a world that is filled with God's touch and with divine love.

The Godsongs

In the world of the Godsongs, God is a constant presence in the world but at the same time lives above the world. The songs are poetry and poetry allows us to participate in paradox without trying to resolve it. The qualities of aboveness and presence are both important, they are two poles of one reality. God in Godself, in the above makes a difference in the way that things are in the world below. In the first place, God in Godself has creative power and wisdom. God has a vision for the world, a vision of fruitfulness. God creates, ordering the world in such a way that all works with all to promote harmony and bounty. God knows, in his wisdom, that to be fruitful is to be free, so as God creates, God sets free, giving creative power to the creature, human and non-human alike. Through God's creative wisdom and power that are "above," the world "below" comes to be. The second reason that God's aboveness is important is that it provides a model of creativity for humanity. Humans, who are part of God's good creation and recipients of God's wisdom and power, look to God above to learn how to use God's gifts for the good of all creation, for the whole of which they are a part.

The following song expresses this thought so well that, although I cited it already in the first chapter, I will repeat it here:

Opačā, mīļš Dieviņ,	Opača, dear God,
Tu augšām, es lejā,	You are above, I am below,
Tu man devi rudzus miežus,	You gave me rye and barley,
Es baroju kumeliņu.	I fed my little horse.

33684

God's creativity is wise because it is shared. This is not so much something that God does as it is something that God is in Godself, in the aboveness. If God were not to share wisdom in creativity, it would remain a thought, a dream in the mind of God. Since the songs see God as creator, this means that God necessarily shares his vision with creation. This also means that God's wisdom must be shared all along the line; where it stops, creativity stops with it. Looking to God as model, humans realize their responsibility to life which is sharing.

The order in the song, God above, humans below, God give gifts to humans, humans feed animals, sounds hierarchical. God is on top, humans in the middle, animals at the bottom. Indeed, hierarchy was a fact of life in feudal times that gave birth to the songs, but the songs as a whole resolutely affirm relationality. They emphasize that all of creation is touched by God, created and set free, even a piece of firewood. The world is filled with God's presence and in God, everything is part of a whole. God's wisdom takes care of the whole because it is God's creativity that envisioned this wonderful order and put it into place. Non-human creation participates in God's order, for instance, bees make honey in the oak trees and give their honey to the world. Humans have a choice;

they may participate or impede God's creativity. The songs invite us to take part in creation by sharing the gifts of God with others, to share God's wisdom as God in Godself does.

God's creativity is expressed in the world, not only as order but also as beauty and the human response to beauty is wonder. The rainy weather in Latvia seems to have inspired a plethora of songs about God in a gray coat. This is another one of them:

Dieviņš jāja rudzu lauku,	God rode through the field of rye,
Ar pelēku kumeliņu,	On his little gray horse,
Pelēks bija rudzu lauks,	Grey was the field of rye,
Pelēks Dieva kumeliņš.	Grey was God's little horse.

54648

In this song, we also become aware of the fact that God is hidden in nature. Prosaically speaking, the scene that it depicts is a field of wheat on a rainy day but the poetic eye of the singer sees something more. The rain imparts a silvery hue to the air and the field; the ordinary becomes beautiful. It also acquires depth of meaning because it reveals God's creativity that makes the wheat grow. The poet sees with eyes of wonder that uncover extraordinary depth in the ordinary. In the songs, wonder is the way that humans participate in the beauty of the earth that manifests God's hidden presence.

Brīnumam nevarēju,	I cannot help but wonder
Kas par Dieva likumiņu,	At your order, God,
Pēm bij' rudzi, šogad mieži,	Last year rye, this year barley,
Citu gadu papuvīte.	Next year fields at rest.
Pēm bij' meita, šogad sieva,	Last year maiden, this year wife,

Citu gadu māmuliṇa.
17769

Next year mother.

This song combines wonder, God's order and the sense that everything is related to everything in a whole that is creativity and fruitfulness. The whole includes the cycles of planting so that the earth may recover as well as the cycle of life in which the singer goes from daughter to wife to having a baby of her own.

The cycle of life also includes death. When death is premature, when children are left orphans or when a widow is left without help or resources, the songs see death as evil, however, in and of itself, it is part of the cycle of life. One song tells us that the soul goes singing into God's garden. Another advises the soul not to worry about making a ladder to get into heaven; God will let down a ladder when he sees the soul coming. In life and in death, God is present. In spite of contingency, the life cycle is orderly; it begins, it matures and it dies. God is present as order and wisdom that are trustworthy. The cycles of the seasons also affirm God's faithfulness. The earth is renewed each spring after a cold winter. The leaves appear on the trees, witness to God who is present. Faithfulness and wonder combine as responses to God who is manifest in nature as order and beauty.

The songs about nature speak not only about God's wisdom but also of divine creative power that renews nature. They invite humans to wonder, to recognize and thus participate in God's presence in the world. The songs about work invite participation in a more direct way because they celebrate the fact that the world and God work together. They tell us that God not only created the earth but also ensures its fruitfulness by coming down into the world to work the land

together with creation, animal and human. God participates directly in clearing the fields and in sowing seeds. Plowing is done by horses and humans in God's presence because God walks along, helping moment by moment, at the beginning of a step and at its end. After the planting has been done, God walks the fields in his gray coat, blessing new life.

The work songs speak of creative power that rests in God who shares it with the world, who empowers by becoming a co-worker with creation. Whether it is by working himself or helping others, moment by moment, God is present. In the doing of work, humans become aware that God is working alongside. They participate in God's vision of fruitfulness by becoming co-workers with God.

A Relational God: Process Thought and the Godsongs in Dialogue

To compare Process thought and the Godsongs might seem like comparing apples and oranges. One is intellectually complex, the other simple and poetic, however they meet on the common ground of their view of God in relation to the world which is that God and the world are not identical, but the world needs God and God needs the world. For both paradigms, it is important that God and the world are not one and the same because the world needs something that is of God, divine vision, and God needs something that is of the world, a place to realize the vision. Both also find that God makes Godself known to the world through divine wisdom and power, inviting the world to participate in God's vision of harmony and well-being for all of creation. In the following section, I will compare the Process and Godsong view of each of these categories.

Both Process thought and the Godsongs place great importance on the constant presence of God in the world, a relational presence. In order to be relational, the world and God cannot be one. In addition, relationality is reciprocal; not only does the world need God, but that God also needs the world. In both paradigms, God wills the well-being of all creation and needs the help of creation to make well-being actual. In Process thought, this is stated in terms of the Primordial nature of God envisioning all possibilities and ordering them into a harmonious whole which is the divine vision of beauty, creativity, justice and love. However, no matter how wonderful the divine vision may be, it will remain a vision only without the world that makes it actual; God needs the world. The songs do not take us back to the time when possibilities were in the mind of God, they start, so to speak, in the middle of the story. They tell of a world in which God has realized God's vision of plenitude, a vision of creative beauty and harmony, there is an "already" component to their view of God's work in the world. At the same time, they do have a "not yet" part similar to that of process thought because God's creativity is ongoing and God depends on creation to participate. God cannot accomplish God's will alone, God needs the world for new possibilities to become actual. The Godsongs and Process thought share the view that God's vision for the world is that of creativity and wholeness which cannot become actual outside of the world.

Relationality is reciprocal; just as God need the world, the world also needs God. It needs God for two reasons; first and foremost, without God,

nothing would exist. Process thought says that without God's touch for each moment, nothing would come to be and the songs say that God created everything that is. Furthermore, the world needs God's vision in order to flourish, to have what Jesus called life abundant. Life abundant is envisioned as justice in Process thought and as fruitfulness in the songs, but in both of them, it is God's vision, grounded in God and not the world. The vision of God is an ideal that can shape reality in the world because it is attractive, it pulls the world to "transcend what has been by the virtue of the relevance of what is not yet actual."⁴ The attractiveness of vision is God's relational power. This view of power is shared by Process thought and the songs. God does not exert unilateral power; God shares an attractive vision of things as they might be and pulls creation to participate in it.

God's vision is attractive, but the distance between what might be and what is can seem unbridgeable at times. Both Process thought and the songs know that the world needs God's help, one step at a time, to conform to God's will, therefore God must know not only possibilities but also the reality of the world. The Process model says that God knows the world through internal relations, feeling each experience just as it experiences itself. The songs say that God comes down into the world and is close. God is present in the tears of the orphan, in the songs of the workers, in brokenness and in faithfulness; God knows the fullness of all that is.

Both Process thought and the Godsongs affirm that God is present in the world as the unity of God's vision and perfect knowledge of earthly reality.

⁴ Birch and Cobb, 189.

God's presence is mediated to the world through the sharing of divine wisdom and power. In Process thought, this is God's lure for the world. It is wisdom when it unifies God's perfect knowledge of ordered possibilities and perfect knowledge of reality in the world. God's knowledge is greater than the world's because God envisions possibilities that are already realized and those that are not yet actual and God also knows the full reality of each actual occasion in the world. The wisdom of God fashions a lure for the becoming moment, one that is truly relevant to its present and that is creative and transformative for its future. God's wisdom is guidance. God's power is also a synthesis of possibilities ordered in harmony and of full knowledge of reality in the world. God lures the world not only with the attractiveness of the vision, but also by providing incremental and real possibilities for the occasion to participate in it. God helps, one step at a time.

Interestingly, the songs reverse the Process view of wisdom and power; they see wisdom as God's vision and power as divine guidance. However, both are ways that God is present in the world, inviting it to participate in God's creativity and helping it to do so. Wisdom is the way that God is made manifest in nature, in order and in beauty. It is the ability of the poet to see beyond surface reality which is beauty, into the deeper reality that is the creativity of God. The singer recognizes the unity and paradox of God's presence. Because God comes down into the world, God is present in surface reality just as truly as God is present in the spirit of creativity; the two are parts of a whole. Moreover, the singer is also part of the whole, part of God's creative order. God's presence

mediates an awareness of wholeness, of creativity; of God's vision. This is similar to God's attractive vision that is power in Process thought and it also is a lure for the world, because the vision itself includes the little bee that makes honey one flower at a time. Process thought and the songs share an attractive vision that is of God together with a lure to participate in the vision, little by little. In the songs, God's power is akin to God's wisdom in Process thought. Again, both agree that it results from the unity of God as possibilities and of God's perfect knowledge of the world. In the songs, the vision of God is that of creativity and freedom; when God created, he set creation free so that it could be fruitful. For the singer, reality was not freedom but serfdom and God comes down to be a part of this reality. God invites the singer to be a part of God's vision in a way that is possible, to care for the earth and to rejoice at its bounty. This is a lure that is salvific because it gives meaning to life. To underscore the value of the peasants' work in God's vision, God participates in it by working alongside the singer and helps, moment by moment. Like wisdom in Process thought, divine power guides the singer to realize the best possibility for the present moment.

After the lure has been sent, Process thought says that it may be accepted, modified or rejected by the becoming moment, that this is the power of the world and its freedom. The songs say that creativity can only happen in freedom, however they point out that freedom is relative. In them, a serf who is powerless in the world and who is considered not quite human has very little freedom. Likewise, Process thought says that the freedom of the becoming moment is

relative to its past which is social reality, habits, talents and many other things. Neither Process thought nor the songs see earthly freedom as absolute. Yet, because the world is relational not only to its own reality, but also to God who is all freedom and possibility in the Primordial nature, present reality can be transformed creatively. God comes into the world as presence, through wisdom and power, and lures the world to participate in God's vision in ways that are relevant to reality and therefore truly possible. The serf without worldly freedom can participate freely in God's vision, can be God's co-worker.

God's lure is invitation and it is also God's faithfulness. In the Process model, God lures us moment by moment without fail. In the songs, God's order in the cycles of life reveals God who is trustworthy, who renews life faithfully. At the same time, the songs also say that God is hidden in the very order of nature that proclaims his presence, in the beauty that manifests his wisdom. Process thought provides a way to understand why this could be so. It speaks of depth, constancy and contextuality.⁵ Because God's lure comes so early in the process of synthesis, the becoming moment is more aware of other influences than it is of God. In the songs, the beauty of the world is surface reality that can distract us from discovering God's creativity in its depths. They also heartily agree that God is constantly present and so, ironically, may not be perceived because we do not know what it is to be without God. Finally, God knows our reality, what is truly possible for us and so God's lure will be incremental, step by step. In the songs, God helps not only step by step but at the beginning of a step and at its end. God's

⁵ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, The Whispered Word: A Theology of Preaching (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 4-6.

lure may be hidden in daily reality, but it is faithful. It may be trusted. The songs suggest that the way to trust God is to participate in God's wisdom by attentive wonder at the beauty of the world and to participate in God's power by working together with God to foster creativity in the world.

Participation in God's vision is the way that the world reacts to God's lure. It does not matter if it is accepted, modified or rejected outright, it is still participation because God accepts the completed actual occasion into the Consequent nature, values it and transforms it to its best possibility in the Primordial nature and sends a new contextual and incremental lure. In a relational world, the only possibility that does not exist is non-relationality. No matter what happens, God works with the world, constantly luring it to its own best future. The Godsongs say that God makes good out of no-good, but good remains embedded in no-good. It is not either one or the other, it is both together. God does not have coercive power, the world can choose the no-good. On the other hand, God does have tremendous attractive power to inspire transformation and to ground it in God's own reality. In addition, God comes into the reality of the world as presence to help the world, luring it step by step. God simply does not give up.

Both the Godsongs and Process thought are oriented to God-in-the-world who makes a difference in the way we perceive our reality and the way that we live in the midst of it. This is the "so what" ⁶ of both paradigms. They do not seek to explain God in Godself but to see how God touches each moment of our

⁶ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, class discussion in "Process Thought and Feminism," Claremont School of Theology, Spring, 2001.

lives. The infinity of possibilities that is God in Process thought, the abundance of life and creativity of the songs needs us. This is an amazing thought. At the same time, the same infinity of possibilities and abundant life energizes us, attracts us and lures us to participate in the co-creation of novelty, not in spite of our brokenness, but accepting and working with it. Furthermore, we can trust God to be present and to help. Wondrously, we may, if only we so choose, become part of God's vision of wholeness for the world, one flower at a time.

CHAPTER 4

THE GODSONGS AND PROCESS THOUGHT AS METAPHORS FOR PREACHING

In the previous chapter, I allowed the Godsongs and Process thought to “speak” to each other and found that their view of God’s relationship with the world is similar. They both agree that God both transcends the world and is immanent in the world. The Godsongs see God’s presence in the world through the metaphor of shared divine wisdom and power; Process thought would agree that this is one way to experience the relationship of God and the world. The songs and Process thought communicate a way of seeing God. In this chapter, I propose to examine the way that they may communicate to my congregation in preaching.

As much as I love Process thought and the Godsongs, a sermon is not a lecture on philosophy or folklore, it is a word of God from the Bible. However, the Biblical view of God shares a quality with that of Process thought and the Godsongs; they are all metaphors for the relationship of God to reality in the world. Metaphors both reflect and form the way that we experience the whole of our reality, a whole that includes ourselves, others, the earth, God. It is my thesis, that our reality is more complex than the metaphors that are commonly used to represent it and that therefore the various parts of our everyday life may seem at odds with each other. The relational metaphors of Process thought and the

Godsongs offer one way to seek wholeness. They inform the way that I read the Bible stories and the way that I share God's word with the congregation in sermons, which are also metaphors in themselves. Therefore I will first ask what metaphor is and where it comes from, then I will look at today's reality that I share with my congregation. Finally, I will suggest that metaphors can speak to this reality in a way that adds richness and contrast; as possibilities for harmony and wholeness.

Metaphors

Sallie McFague says that a metaphor is a "word or phrase used *inappropriately*."¹ In fact, it is the very inappropriateness that makes it appropriate. For example, when social scientists attempt to describe human love, they use discursive and direct language. They measure, among other things, qualities of likeness and difference, genetic traits that make one human more attractive than another. Love, they tell us, is the desire to pass desirable genes to the next generation. Their answer has nothing in common with the feeling that we know as love. Poets, on the other hand, search for inappropriate words, for metaphors that communicate depth, amazement, faithfulness and we are brought into the experience with them; yes, we agree, this is love.

Language cannot describe, in a direct way, the fullness of our experience. This problem is compounded when we speak about God. We do not know God in Godself. In all sacred texts, in tradition, in theology, God is a mystery that is not given to our knowledge, therefore, all language about God is necessarily

¹ McFague, 33.

inappropriate. We may say that God reveals Godself to us in sacred scripture, but even then, it is partial revelation because it is conditioned by the time, place, problems, worldview of the one receiving the revelation. In fact, it is the partiality of revelation that makes it illuminating. If revelation were to be a discursive description of an absolute reality it would be like the social scientists' dissection of love, it would have no connection with our reality. If, on the other hand, revelation addresses the cares and joys of our lives, it will illuminate a way of living with God in the world. Like poets, we will search for inappropriate words, for metaphors to describe the reality that we experience; our relationship with God and God's relationship with the world. We will "attempt to talk about what we do not know how to talk about."² In other words, we will use words that are partial in order to illuminate a reality that is only partially known, but that is of ultimate importance to our lives.

As we search for ways to talk about what we do not know how to talk about, we follow in the footsteps of the Biblical writers, the priests and prophets of the Hebrew Bible and the writers of the New Testament. The Bible contains stories, poetry, letters; it has many different views of the way that God acts in the world and reacts to the world. However, in spite of their differences, they share the view that there is a power greater than the world that is also present in the world; God who is just and faithful and who requires justice and fidelity from God's people. The stories of the Hebrew Bible tell of the way that people are faithful, how they fall away from God and how God longs for their return. They

² McFague, xii.

are partial illuminations of God for their time, metaphors for God's reciprocal relationship with the world.

For Christians, God's presence and salvific love is seen through the paradigm of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus both used metaphors in his preaching and was himself a metaphor for God. The stories that Jesus told illustrate the illuminating quality of metaphors that were surprising and even shocking to his listeners. For example, Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to a woman baking bread with yeast. Yeast was both mundane and profane; every little bit of yeast had to be thrown away before Passover. Yet, in Jesus' story, it represented God's Kingdom, a metaphor for the way that God is present in the world. Furthermore, it was not somebody holy baking the bread, but a woman who was low in the patriarchal hierarchy of the time. Jesus used something that was familiar to his hearers and turned it upside down in a shocking way, critiquing both social and religious ways of thinking. Religion had lost sight of the fact that ritual purity was only a metaphor for God's relationship with the world; instead of illuminating the way that humans relate to God, it limited their freedom and hindered justice. Jesus the preacher is a model for preachers in all ages, to use stories of the familiar to speak about the unfamiliar and also for the fact that he based his preaching in his tradition. God's law, the metaphor of God's relationship with the world, is the paradigm against which he measures his stories. We measure our preaching against the story of Jesus Christ, his life, death and resurrection which are metaphors for God's salvific love for the world and for the way that we live in what Jesus called God's Kingdom. As McFague points

out, the story of Jesus does not contain a concept that we can extrapolate and then forget about the story itself.³ It forms the basis of preaching and it provides multiple metaphors for God's presence in the world.

Jesus preaching also teaches us about the dangers of ossified metaphors that no longer illuminate but actually hinder the world's relationship with God. The fact that Jesus called God "Abba" is a good example. To his first hearers, it probably was shocking because it is not a common Jewish title for God.⁴ It illuminated a loving and close relationship between God and humans. Now, as we know, it names God's "reality" as a male parent and has lost its metaphorical power; it does not expand our way of thinking about God, it is a restriction. Today, just as in Jesus time, tradition makes truth claims and therefore does not welcome new metaphors. To follow Jesus is to creatively transform tradition; not to abolish it, but to understand it as deeply as we possibly can and then to make it speak to our world. Just as Jesus did, we must search for new and illuminating metaphors that will be partial. Acknowledging this, we may be bold and shocking so that they enable the hearer to participate in God's relationship with the world just as they did in Jesus stories.

The gospel stories encourage bold participation in God's relationship to the world in another way; they represent diverse viewpoints that the New Testament does not try to harmonize.⁵ They demonstrate the power of partiality

³ McFague, 31.

⁴ Prof. Gregory Riley, Claremont School of Theology, says that calling God Father comes from Greco-Roman religion, where Zeus is commonly called Father.

⁵ It would be too optimistic to say that they all got along with each other; the various controversies and mutual anathemas of the early church do not encourage any such view. However, it remains a fact that diversity is present in the Bible.

that illuminates because they address the needs of various communities through the lens of Jesus' story. In an age where God's presence was taken for granted, they call God "Lord" and "Almighty," emphasizing God's power over the world. Today, when everyday reality is secular, metaphors that emphasize God's distance from the world no longer illuminate. Encouraged by the example of the Bible, we may seek metaphors that emphasize God's immanence that answer the needs of our community today.

To summarize, metaphors are not descriptions of God's reality, they are "likely accounts."⁶ They are partial because language cannot express the full reality of our own experience and certainly not that of God. Nevertheless, we may speak and speak boldly of God's reciprocal relationship with the world—because we acknowledge that the metaphors we use are partial and do not pretend to be truth for all time. In doing so, we will be following in the footsteps of Jesus in the way of creative transformation.

The Congregation and Reality in Today's World.

It will be clear from the previous section, that the need for new metaphors is not itself something new. Careful reading of the Hebrew Bible as well as of the New Testament allows us to see that God is always making Godself known in new and different ways. The story of God's presence in the world and salvific action on behalf of humanity is told and retold by succeeding generations that receive the tradition and transform it for their lives. The story of God-and-the-

⁶ McFague, 33.

world is one constant of the Bible; the other is contemporary reality.⁷ In this section, I will examine contemporary reality that I share with my congregation.

Since not only my reality but also my identity is shared with the congregation, I will presume to speak in their name. We are Lutheran, Latvian and we live in a secular and consumerist world. As Christians, we have been formed by the stories of our traditional faith which emphasizes the aseity, omnipotence and omniscience of God but also God's salvific love and goodness. The Bible stories are familiar to us and we are believers. Our Latvian identity is important to us, we wish to hear the word of God preached in our native language.⁸ We also value our folkloric tradition highly and it speaks to our hearts, but we suspect that the Godsongs, being pagan, have nothing to say to Christian faith. As people who live in a secular and consumerist world, we do not see God's presence as daily reality except in prayers. We have a vague notion that God does the big, important things and that it would be presumptuous to assume God's interest in the small details of our lives.

This is the surface reality of our lives. As surface, it is quite stable and harmonious. God who takes care of the larger aspects of this life because he is all-powerful and knows everything is not effected by my small problems and joys. That this God is not present in daily life is almost axiomatic; like a busy CEO, we must make an appointment to see him and arrive at his house at the right time and day. The two potentially dissonant factors in the surface reality are the stories of

⁷ McFague, 41.

⁸ This is true not only for the older generation but, surprisingly, also for the youth. They were taught to pray in Latvian as children and the language remains meaningful for them.

the Bible and the view of God's presence in the Godsongs, both of which are valued highly.

In preaching, I propose that these dissonant factors may be used to destabilize surface reality. It is my hunch that deep down in our souls, we all long for God who is present and who helps, but surface reality hinders the realization of this deep longing. Our secular world does not have a place for God's presence; instead of mystery, we have problems that are answered by science. Our present religious world has a place for God, but it is far away, so transcendent that it does not address our reality. Faith becomes an act of the will. The surface secular and religious world are so much more present than the longing for Presence in our depth. Through the Bible stories and the Godsongs that participate in everyday reality and also have depth of meaning to be discovered, I propose to delve beneath the surface, discovering the depth and allowing the two to speak to each other.

Allowing depth to speak to surface offers new possibilities, that is to say, new metaphors for God's relationship with the world; metaphors that are born in the Biblical stories. My reading of the stories is informed by a relational view of God that comes from both Process thought and the Godsongs, which allow me to perceive their depth. In addition, Process thought also influences the way that I share my understanding with the congregation. It tells me that I must deal with reality that is present, with the present faith of the congregation. This faith has been formed over many years and has guided their lives; it is to be respected. However, this does not mean that I cannot offer new possibilities, as *possibilities*.

God's daily, moment by moment presence is both the Process and Biblical view of God. It suggests that God's relationship to the world is internal, that it has just as much to do with God as with us. It is not something that we have to forge against all obstacles but something that we discover as "the basic given of our existence."⁹ Furthermore, the God of the Bible is active in the world, creating, willing, blessing, responding; God is not indifferent to daily life.¹⁰ God's relationship with the world allows us to discover our relationship with God, first by becoming aware of God's presence and then by participating in a whole that includes us as an intrinsic and necessary part. These are possibilities for a new understanding of the Bible stories, informed by Process thought. They are reinforced by the metaphors of the Godsongs which, not being sacred scripture, are easier to see as possibilities rather than Truth. Sharing the Biblical and Process view of God's presence in the world, the Godsongs speak of God who comes down from the mountain, slowly, slowly. In addition, they say that God shares God's power with the world. God has power in Godself, but effects change in the world by creating and setting free, giving power to others so that they may become God's co-workers. God does not rule from above, God comes into the world and works along with creation. The Bible stories, Process thought and the Godsongs all share the view that God and the world have a reciprocal relationship which we discover by participation.

⁹ McFague, 11.

¹⁰ McFague, 18.

The metaphors for God's presence in the world in the Bible stories and the Godsongs were not made up out of thin air, they are born in a real world with its specific problems and joys. They represent reality speaking to depth and depth speaking to reality, for their time. Since we no longer share their world, their metaphors for God's presence may speak to our hearts, but we cannot fit them into real life, either theirs or ours. In order for the metaphors to be heard, they must be understood in their context. They must speak to the head as well as to the heart.¹¹ Part of the richness of sermon preparation is reading about the political, social and religious world of the Biblical writers to inform the selected text. In addition, Jesus' stories often refer to his own sacred scripture, the Hebrew Bible and to the religious practice of his day. Sharing this knowledge with the congregation opens the familiar stories to new meaning and understanding, enabling them to be "heard" anew. Speaking to the head may also mean speaking to the heart. In the same way, the Godsong's view of God is made much more meaningful if it is seen in the context of oppression. It might seem that this would be familiar material to Latvian congregations, but the songs have managed to become disembodied poetry, unanchored to any reality in the world. Their depth becomes apparent when seen in light of their reality, speaking to the whole person, head and heart.

In the Biblical stories and the Godsongs, the depth of the text becomes visible when it speaks to its context. Can our context of today speak to our deep understanding in a similar way? Can it also address the whole person, head and heart? Since our world looks to science for truth, I suggest that metaphors as

¹¹ Suchocki, Whispered Word, 64.

heuristic theology is one possibility and that the Process model is another.

Heuristic theology has a scientific sensibility which proposes a theory to be tested for its adequacy.¹² McFague says that heuristic theology “experiments and tests....imagines possibilities, dares to think differently. It will not accept on the basis of authority but will acknowledge only what it finds convincing and persuasive.”¹³ This is a daring thought for traditional religion until we realize that it was the way of Jesus in his preaching and in the way that he lived his life. In addition, my congregation and I would not be Lutherans today if Martin Luther had not followed the same difficult but rewarding journey. Our tradition, together with heuristic theology, encourages us to be bold, to use metaphors from our daily reality to illuminate the mystery in which we participate.

Process thought posits an extended metaphor of the reciprocal relationship of God and the world in terms of a model, which is also scientific method. It addresses the mind in an exciting way, proposing possibilities that fit with life as we experience it today. One of the problems presented by the secular worldview is the absence of God in everyday life. The model shows us that life without God is not possible, that every single moment of our existence depends on God’s touch and that God depends on us as well. Ironically, it is God’s constant presence that hides God from our awareness; we simply do not know what it would be like to be without God. In addition, God’s touch comes very early in each moment’s process of becoming. We become more aware of our past that is reacting to God’s lure than we are of the lure itself. God is the depth of our becoming.

¹² My son, Martin, is an epidemiologist. When I was reading McFague’s book, I shared some of it with him and he informed me that I was describing the scientific method.

¹³ McFague, 36.

Finally, God's touch is so contextual to our lives that it is not perceived as something extraordinary. It is not a voice from above, it is a small voice within, luring and inviting us in small, incremental steps, to our own best future.¹⁴

The Process model does not pretend to offer absolute and immutable Truth, but it does propose possibilities and searches for partial and illuminating truth. It does not "explain" God, but it gives us a way to think about God who is relational to the world, who feels and reacts to the world and who guides it with power that is not coercive but attractive. As a model, it makes our surface reality speak to our depth. Curiously, although we are bold in the world of science, we have become singularly timid in religion. In the beginning of the chapter, I suggested that the whole of our reality is more complex than our metaphors for reality. The complex world of science is not reflected in our metaphors for God; the two parts of our reality do not speak to each other. Since they do not reflect the whole of our reality, they cannot form it either. The Process model as well as heuristic theology offer possibilities for wholeness, challenging us to "sin boldly," as Luther advised, trusting in God who is present moment by moment. In this way, the depth of our present reality may illuminate the surface and the surface may reflect the depth.

Summary

Metaphors, by definition, are inappropriate words that we use when there are no appropriate words to describe a feeling or and experience. As such, they are the only appropriate way to speak about God whose reality we cannot know,

¹⁴ Suchocki, Whispered Word, 4-6.

but whom we experience deeply as a presence in our lives. Metaphor illuminates our reality because it is partial, it speaks to its time. The stories of the Bible illustrate both the illuminating aspect and the partiality of metaphor; Jesus use of them was shocking in its day, turning conventional wisdom on its head to speak about God's Kingdom, which is yet another metaphor, one that speaks about God's relationship with the world. Jesus critique of the familiar metaphors of the religion of his day point to their partiality. When they become ossified they are not heard anymore as metaphors and they can actually become a hindrance to faith. Jesus' example not only illustrates the qualities of metaphors but it also encourages us to follow in his footsteps and find new and powerful metaphors that speak to our own time.

Two such metaphors for my ministry are Process thought and the Godsongs. In them, I find images for God's presence that are true to the Biblical stories and that answer a need to experience God in daily life. On the surface, it seems that God is not present in the secular world and is far away in religious metaphors. Yet, I posit that the depths of both the secular and religious world speak of God's presence. Because my congregation is Latvian, I have an additional way to speak of God through the folksongs. The metaphors contained in Process thought and the Godsongs helps me to delve beneath surface reality to depths where God's presence may be experienced.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Summary

As I said in the introduction, this project is the result of a journey that is as meandering as that of the Children of Israel in the desert. It is only as I became acquainted with Process thought, that spoke so eloquently to my mind, that I became aware of the fact that it also addressed a question that was deep in my heart. It was only by finding the path to an answer that I became aware of the question. It was only after I had been ordained and became, because of my office, a “safe person” to talk to about deeper questions, that I became aware of the hunger for God’s presence in a world that seems not to have a place for God. It was only after a class in storytelling theology that I realized that the folksongs of my tradition might have something to say to a modern world. This was confirmed when I used a song in a sermon; it was clear from the comprehension that I felt in the congregation, that the song did not need to be explained, it communicated all by itself and in a deeper way than any longer example might have done. One young man commented that he had never heard the songs used in a sermon and I began to wonder why we, in the Latvian Lutheran church are giving up this resource, a most valuable resource, to speak about God.

It was my hunch that the songs view of God might resemble, in some ways, that which is found in Process thought, but I did not know if this would

prove to be true. It was clear that I had to examine the songs first, before anything else, to find out what they had to say, which is why that is the first chapter of the project. However, in the summary, I would like to follow the journey of the project from its beginning with my “discovery” of Process thought and its relevance for today’s world.

The single most convincing aspect of Process thought is that it lives in the world that we all know, that of science and scientific models. Even if, like me, a person has no great knowledge in science, it is still the way that this world looks at reality, a world in which we all live and think and believe. The Process model, which is based upon the assumption that experience is the basic stuff of reality, speaks to our understanding from the inside; yes, this is the way things are. The model both fits and illuminates reality. For the purposes of this project, it was especially helpful as an intellectual aid to understanding why God may seem absent from daily life when, in reality, no life at all is possible without God. It is helpful because it brings the feelings of God’s presence that are intuitive and deep into conversation with daily life, the outer and busy reality of the world. Because it addresses the intellect, the model has “staying power” that supports the intuitive and poetic expression of the Bible stories. It is yet another way to speak about God; as McFague would say, to speak about that which we do not know how to speak.

Process thought also speaks to my reality as a preacher because it brings together the surface and depth dimension of our lives and shows a way to make them whole. It is, in itself, a proposition, an interesting idea that may be tried out

to see if it fits the reality of our lives. The concept of propositions also encouraged me to see if the Godsongs could also illuminate reality in some way, that would make them useful as preaching metaphors.

The Godsongs see God as presence; transcendental presence in Wisdom and Power and also as immanent, personal presence as *Dieviņš* who shares divine wisdom(diminutive form) and power(dim. form) with the world. The use of the diminutive for God, Wisdom and Power is interesting because domination power from harsh feudal landlords was the daily reality of the singer of the songs. God's power is in contrast to that of the human lords, it is shared with all of creation. And God's shared power is greater than that of the human's. The sharing of power has an ethical dimension as well; since God creates and sets free, (creates all that exists, even fire wood) it is the responsibility of humans to respect that freedom in others. God's order—sharing—presumes that humans will, in their turn, share as well. In daily life, God's power is empowering to working people; especially in the more difficult physical tasks such as threshing and milling, God is present and helps. God's help enables the worker to feel joy and to express that joy in song; the singing is most pleasing to God. It is a reciprocal relationship; God gives, people receive, people give back, God receives. Sometimes God is not visible in the work, it is only afterwards that God's presence is detected, and yet, God is present mostly as power (dim.) in the *doing* of work. God helps, little by little, at the beginning and at the end of a single step, so God is always there—helping, empowering but not doing it all. People play a crucial role in the care and fertility of the world and God helps.

In nature, God is present as beauty, God gives leaves to the trees (and even spins some of them). God is hidden as well, riding on a gray horse and wearing a gray coat in a country that often has overcast skies.¹ In the poetic expression of the song, this gray becomes beautiful and it is in beauty that God is revealed. It is important to note, that God is not the same as nature; nature reveals something of God. The songs tell us that God is present in the ordinary, in gray skies, in work. If we look deeply and attentively, with a sense of wonder at the “sheer thereness” of things, as Scott would say, we may see that they point to something greater than themselves. When we look deeply at our daily life and experience, we may find that God is present.

The songs are realistic about life; life is both good and bad. The presence of God does not solve all problems, but it does make resistance possible. The peasant folk could not change the fact of their oppression, but they could try to find beauty and strength in God who is present all around. The songs are the ultimately democratic because they share their experience; they assume that everyone can have the attentiveness to see deeply as they do. They share with all.

Can the Process view of the world fit together with the view of the Godsongs? They both see the world through a hermeneutic of presence, they both see freedom as necessary, they both acknowledge that God is present in the world as it is, that God meets our condition. In both paradigms, God is greater than the world *and* God is always and necessarily present in the world. The Godsongs and Process thought agree that God is immanent in our world through shared

¹ Instead of becoming depressed about the overcast skies, the ancient people made them represent God's presence and the fertility of the land.

power and wisdom. Process thought says that God's power is that of an attractive vision in which we may participate. In the songs, this is called God's wisdom which God shares by creating order in nature that includes the human and non-human. Because human persons are part of this order, it is their responsibility to share just as God shares. It is clear that not all people choose to do so, the songs are written by people who suffer from the inability of others to share God's creation. The ethical ideal is an ideal, not a description of the reality of the world. It is like the initial aim of God; what an occasion might become. The orphan songs also tell us that reality is not always the way that God envisions it by sharing power, but God is also present in wisdom, wisdom that feels the occasion just as the occasion feels. When reality is suffering, God is present in the suffering.

God shares power by helping people at work in the doing of the work. The emphasis is on the mutuality of doing and helping; one does not come without the other. The help is moment by moment; a point of contact with the Process model. The sharing power and wisdom of God make it possible for people to resist oppression in their way of seeing the world and this helps them live in that world, with joy. For the songs, God's presence does not change their outside reality—they were not liberated for hundreds of years—but it does enable them to resist in their depth, to see the world as filled with a shared power and wisdom and to see themselves as part of this order.

Process thought and the songs also share the view of God who is hidden because of the contextuality of God's initial aim. God in a gray coat, God who

comes down very slowly in order not to disturb the world—these are examples of contextuality. Process thought says that God is hidden in the depth of the occasion, while the surrounding world, as the past, is more visible. The Godsongs don't give a model for this, but they do say that God will be discovered when singer looks at daily life with eyes of wonder and with attentiveness. God is hidden in the depths of everyday experience.

As poetry, the songs celebrate just this deeper reality, the inscape of things. Their only power is that of words, words that are used inappropriately, that is to say, metaphors. These inappropriate words can name reality for the reader (or hearer). In the magic of the artistic process, the poet envisions and shares with another who “catches” and completes the vision of the poet in the imagination. The poem becomes a part of another person's reality. In the songs, which are an oral tradition, the images had to be vivid and evocative for the poetic process to be effective. Because preaching is also oral communication, the means of expression are the same. If the preacher is able to find ways of making a story come alive, the hearer will catch the sermon and complete it. The sermonic process is also akin to the poetic one in its ethos of deep encounter. The very first step that the sermon takes is to meet the text in its own world and to share this meeting with the congregation. In addition, the sermon will seek to illuminate ways that God is present in the everyday life of the congregation. This is what the songs do in their world, it is also what the Biblical stories of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament do. They are replete with metaphors for God's presence in the world. Following their example, it is the preacher's task to seek

ever new words to speak of divine presence in daily life and to offer them as partial and, hopefully, illuminating possibilities for the reality of the congregation.

Conclusion

Both my own meandering journey and my conversations with others in my capacity as pastor convinced me that we need to find new ways to speak about God's presence in our daily lives. It was not the case that God had gone missing and that, somehow, God had to be "found." However, it was and is true that our common metaphors for God have overwhelmingly emphasized transcendence to the point that God has become almost invisible in daily life. We simply had no way to speak about God's immanence that reflected our real world. Therefore I began another journey, that of this project, looking for new words. Along the way, I experienced a few surprises. The first one was that in seeking God's immanence, I also found God's transcendence, but in a new way. Process thought expresses this in terms of the Primordial nature of God who envisions all possibilities and orders them in divine beauty and harmony. The Godsongs speak of God's order in the world which is also God's vision of fruitfulness. In both paradigms, humans and non-humans alike participate, if they so choose, in God's order with God's help. Participation is the way that we become aware of God who is present. Because God depends on our participation to fulfill the divine vision, we become, in fact, co-workers or co-creators with God. The transcendent and the immanent are parts of a whole that is God and the world. In today's world, we are becoming ever more aware of the importance of relationality, of the

web that connects us to each other. Thoughtful folk are also aware of the fact that we still live in individualistic ways that are detrimental to the whole. The fact that it is *God's* transcendent vision, and that God *helps* us take small, incremental steps to participate in it can give us hope for the future. The God of presence is both vision and help.

Another surprise in the journey of the project was the way that metaphor, both in and of itself and in its literary function, turned out to be so relevant to our world. This was not unexpected in the discussion of Godsongs as poetry, after all, metaphor is a poetic device. Metaphor is the only way that we can express profound experience and deep emotion. Therefore, it is the only way that we have to speak about the mystery of God, that we cannot *know* but in which we may participate.

Participation is also the way that we experience the metaphor itself because it shares the poetic vision of the poet with the hearer in such a way that the hearer may “complete” it in his or her own imagination. This is clearly true for the Godsongs, for instance in the one where God comes down from the mountain, slowly, slowly; I can *see* God riding down that mountain (which in Latvia can only be a medium size hill). I can *smell* the fragrance of the *ieva* flower and, together with the plowman and his horse, I can *feel* the gentle breeze as God goes gently by. The poet has brought me into his world; I am part of that experience which is one of original blessing. It is the wholeness of God-and-the-world.

It may be unusual to understand Process thought as poetry, but it shares some of the same qualities. The Process model is an extended metaphor of the relationality of all that is with God. It depends on our perception of reality to give it meaning. The Process model is especially helpful because it gives us a way to envision God's presence in every moment of our lives and it also tells us why we might not feel this necessary presence that is truly there. The model illuminates the relationship of God and the world most convincingly, its power allows us to re-cognize God in the world.

Setting out on the journey of this project, one of my worries was the fact that the Godsongs were born in a pagan context. As McFague has pointed out, theology makes truth claims and does not welcome new metaphors for God,² especially not pagan ones. Having examined the songs carefully, however, I came to the conclusion that their view of God's presence accords well with that of Christian theology. In fact, another surprise to me was the fact that their "magical realism" may illuminate the way that some of the Gospel stories speak about God's presence on earth. In the songs, a woman prepares her little room by scrubbing it clean and putting a linen tablecloth on the table because she is expecting God to come visit, *vakarēt*, with her. In some magical way, God *is* there even if not visible to the eye; it may not be surface reality, but it is deep truth that makes a difference to her life. My understanding of this way of seeing informs the way that I read the Biblical stories of Jesus birth, for instance; their truth is deeper than surface reality and speaks to what is really important in life. It speaks to the mystery of God with us.

² McFague, 34.

In addition, as Process thought tells us, the songs influence my present by being a part of my past. No matter how attractive their view of ubiquitous divine presence might be, I no longer live in a world that takes this for granted. We cannot will ourselves into the past but must live in the world as it is. This does not mean that they have no power; on the contrary, the power of the past is what forms the present, but in a new way. The songs are my heritage and the story of my foremothers and forefathers. They tell of their struggles and their joys; as I sing or recite them today, I participate in their experience and root myself in my history. I also find out a little bit about who I am. For this reason, the Godsong's view of God who is constantly present can offer richness of experience for my present. In this way, although I no longer live in their world of long ago, they may still live in my world today.

It was my thesis that the Godsongs could be metaphors or possibilities for preaching a relational theology, that is to say, to preach God's presence in the world. Process thought expresses the Biblical view of God who is internally related to the world in a way that makes sense to our world; it is faith seeking not only understanding, but a way to speak to our time. The Godsongs give me yet another way to communicate God's relationship to the world, a way that speaks to the heritage of my congregation and also to their hearts. As poetry, the songs share experience and allow us to participate in it, just as they speak of God's transcendent vision for the world in which we are participants. They also tell us that God comes down into the world and helps, moment by moment and that

everyone, not just a privileged few, are able to experience God's presence in the wonder of everyday life.

In their content, they speak of God who is present and who helps; this is what I would like to preach to my congregation. In their form, they share experience and allow the hearer to participate. As my journey as pastor continues, it is my hope to preach in this way; to open up reality by encountering it deeply, to describe possibilities and then, to give the sermon up by trusting the Spirit who is always present.³

³ Suchocki, Whispered Word, 57.

APPENDIX

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent
Upon the occasion of the 50th Anniversary
of the
Portland Latvian Lutheran Church. ¹

John 9: 1-41

This is a long reading for a festive day. Fifty years, what a wonderful anniversary. I can imagine all the memories that are present at this commemoration. All the joys, tears, songs, prayers and work that has filled these long years. An anniversary is a time to remember. It is a time to pause and look back at what we have been in order to more fully understand what we are today. A little bit later, at the community meal, our president will take us back in time, to remember.

In a way, we could say that the Gospel of John, from which we get our text today, does the same thing. In remembrance, it tries to understand the present in light of the past. This Gospel came to be in an early Christian community somewhere around the year 100. Some historians think that they lived in Ephesus, others guess Antioch or Alexandria, but to understand the Gospel, the place that it was written is not as important as the time. It was written after the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70, C.E. and the community of John is still trying to deal with the trauma of this loss. You see, before 70 C. E., many of the early Christians were members of the larger Jewish community. They went to the Temple for feast days and on ordinary days, they attended their local synagogue. It was the Temple that held together the various groups that made

¹ My father-in-law, to whom I refer in the sermon, was Pastor of this congregation for 29 years. He died six years ago.

up the Judaism of their day, the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots and Jewish Christians. When they came together in the synagogue to read the Scripture and discuss it—sort of like the way that we do it today in our Bible classes—they would disagree about interpretation, but they could deal with this because of the overarching importance of the Temple with its ritual. The Temple gave unity to their diversity.

After the year 70, this was no longer true. The loss of the Temple, God's dwelling place and the center of their religious life, was a shock that threatened the very foundation of Judaism. All of the sudden, the differences were tolerable before were no longer bearable. Diversity was no longer acceptable and the Pharisees, who represented the majority view of Judaism, started to expel the Jewish Christians from the synagogues. This, of course, represented a double trauma for the early Christians. First they, together with all Jews, lost the Temple and now they were pulled up, roots and all, from their religious and ethnic community.

You may be beginning to wonder why I am telling you all of this—what does it have to do with today's text? The reason is that, in order to understand a Biblical text, we need to know the context in which it came to be. For instance, we read in today's story, that the parents of the blind man "fear the Jews who had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue" (9: 22). This is not the reality of Jesus lifetime and not for a long time after his death and resurrection, but it is daily reality in the life of John's community, painful reality. And looking back to their past, they try to make sense of their present.

When we, in *our* present, read this text, we need to remember that the people who wrote it were themselves Jews and that they were a minority who were oppressed by the

majority. We need to understand them, but we also need to be careful how we read this story in a world that has changed, where Christians have not been a minority for a long time.

I have to say, that in reading the Bible stories, I find myself not only sympathizing but truly understanding the Pharisees, I really do. For instance, in today's story, they keep trying to decide if Jesus is of God. It may seem shocking to us today, just as it apparently was to John's community, to question Jesus origin—of course he is from God! But if we think of the horror that has been unleashed into the world by unquestioning obedience to religious authority—one doesn't have to think long to find examples, like September 11, 2001—it seems to me that thinking and asking questions is not a bad thing at all.

I can even see myself in the legalistic getting-bogged-down-in-details aspect that we associate with the Pharisees. They truly do seem to miss the bigger picture at times and I do too. Last Spring, I needed to have an operation before the end of the semester which meant that I had to take incompletes in all of my classes. This meant that I would have to do write all my final papers in the fall because I was already set to go to Latvia all summer to teach and do research for my folksong project. In addition, the project itself had to be written by late fall. All this research and writing was making my head whirl and, to tell you the truth, I didn't know if I could get it all done. On the verge of tears, I ran into Connie who is a secretary in my school. She took one look at me and sat me down and started to talk—"So tell me about your project. What's it about?" "It's on the Latvian folksongs and the way that they see God," I answered. "And how *do* they see God?" Connie asked. "That God is always present and that God helps." Well, Connie

just raised her eyebrows and looked at me. And we both started to laugh. The bigger picture.

Its not that life's details are not important—they are. In fact, we spend about 99% of our time on them. But we must not forget that which is *most important—that God is present and God helps*. That is what today's Gospel story is trying to tell us. God is present, but we don't always perceive the presence because we are so taken up with the minutiae of daily life. Our folksongs tell us this as well, that we need to quiet ourselves to feel God's presence:

Be silent, young folk,
Be silent, elders,
God is coming
Into the room.

In our Gospel story, Jesus stops by a man who cannot see him. Every day he sits and begs and most probable, Jesus' footsteps were no different from the countless others that passed him by. Sometime people would give him a coin, sometimes not. What a lonely life. But Jesus does not pass by. He touches the man and then tells him to do something. "Go wash in the pool of Siloam." And he went. When he was asked afterwards to point out the one who cured him, he answered, "I don't know." Of course he didn't know, he was blind when Jesus touched his life.

You know, this is our story too. Each and every day—no, each and every moment—we receive a touch of God in our lives. And it asks us to do something. Something that is possible for us. "Go wash in the pool of Siloam." It was God's touch

that, 50 years ago, helped this community become a congregation. It was God's touch that allowed my dearest Father-in-law to live his life, suffer his illness and to die—literally praising God. No matter if we are young, old, healthy, sickly or something in between, God's touch will be something that is possible, truly possible for us. And ironically, just because it is possible, we don't always perceive it as from God. Just like in our story. "Who did this?" "I don't know."

God does not wait until we are nicer, healthier, stronger, better people to touch our lives—God wants to be in the world, to be known in the world. God works with us the way that we are; God is present and God helps. God gives us wheat and rye, as the Godsongs say, and expects us to feed our little horse. To receive and to give to others. As our epistle says, you are part of something that is greater than yourself. You are a child of the Light. Give this light to the world.

In this Bible story, it is possible to see some part of ourselves and our reality in each of the characters in turn—the Pharisees, the man born blind. But on this festive day, this anniversary, I would like to propose something more. Something radical. I think that the story wants us to see ourselves in *Jesus*. We, who receive God's touch, can be God's touch to others. Like Jesus, who lived in God every moment of his life. Jesus' strength came from God and he shared it with those in his life. Jesus lived in God's love and by passing this love on to others, by touching them, God became visible in our world. This is our invitation for the next 50 years! To be the touch of God for others. To receive, to give and to make God visible in the world. Amen.

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